

Towards Understanding the Experiences of Agency of Unaccompanied Asylum
Seeking Children and Young People in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of agency among unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people navigating the UK asylum system. While existing literature often frames unaccompanied young people through a lens of trauma and vulnerability or resilience, this research shifts the focus to examine whether and how young people experience agency within the asylum system and what this looks like.

Using a qualitative approach, the study employs semi-structured interviews with 14 participants - young people as primary participants and professionals in the field as secondary participants. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Findings reveal that agency among young people appears to be dynamic, relational, and interdependent, shaped by their particular context and their interactions with others. Factors such as safety, support, and status facilitate the expansion of agency, whereas prolonged uncertainty, a hostile and complex system, and the impact of the work on professionals constrain this experience. Agency was also noted to impact their self-perception positively.

This research considers agency as a therapeutic dimension to be taken into account when working with young asylum seekers and refugees. It also

contributes to critical discussions on agency in the context of asylum and refugees, offering insights into perspectives on young people, the impact of quality of support, the importance of funding, and the efficiency of the asylum system itself.

Keywords: Agency, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, UASC, unaccompanied young people, asylum, refugees

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AAD – Adversity Activated Development
 ACE – Adverse Childhood Experiences
 AIDA – Asylum Information Database
 BASW – The British Association of Social Workers
 BRP – Biometric Residence Permit
 CBT – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
 ECPAT UK – Every Child Protected Against Trafficking
 ERAMS – Ethics Review and Management System
 ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages
 GDP – Gross Domestic Product
 IRC – International Rescue Committee
 LA – Local Authorities
 LEA – Local Education Authorities
 MCAST – The Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology
 MiCLU – Migrant & Refugee Children’s Legal Unit
 PP – Primary Participants
 PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
 SP – Secondary Participants
 UASC – Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Child
 UASM – Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Minors
 UNCRC – The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
 UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Refugee Agency
 UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund
 WHO – World Health Organization

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context and Rationale for the Research

In order to find a space for children in the asylum system, recognition needs to be given not only to vulnerability but also to the principle of child agency or voice. This will allow child migrants to emerge as agents, decisionmakers, initiators and social actors in their own right, rather than simply the victims of adult violence.

(Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Bhabha, 2007, as cited in Crawley, 2010, p. 168)

An unaccompanied asylum seeking child is a person who is under 18 years of age when the asylum application is submitted, is applying for asylum in their own right and is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who, in law or by custom, has responsibility to do so (Home Office, 2025). In the year ending September 2024, 99,790 people claimed asylum in the United Kingdom. Of these claims, 4,017 were made by unaccompanied children, marking a 30% decrease compared to the previous year.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) accounted for 5% of the total asylum claims during this period and 77% of them were aged 16 or 17 years old (Home Office, 2024). This reflects a broader and global trend of displaced children. By the end of 2023, 47.2 million children were displaced due to

conflict and violence. This figure includes 19.1 million refugee and asylum-seeking children and 28.1 million internally displaced within their own countries. The global number of displaced children doubled between 2010 and 2023, with over 2 million children born as refugees between 2018 and 2023. Although children make up one-third of the world's population, they account for 40% of the world's refugees. Additionally, 2024 was reported to be one of the worst years in history for children in conflict, both in terms of numbers of those affected as well as the level of impact on their lives (UNICEF, 2024).

The statistics are intended to convey the enormity and urgency of the global situation, emphasizing the need for the international community to protect children and young people. One way to achieve this is by providing asylum in the countries where they seek safety. This thesis aims to understand and explore the experiences of unaccompanied children and young people specifically, during their time seeking asylum in the United Kingdom. As stated above, the claims made by unaccompanied minors constitute a very small percentage of refugee claims. However, understanding their needs remains highly relevant, as it can inform their care, services, and policies. There have been pressing concerns regarding unaccompanied children in the UK. For instance, after being housed in Home Office-rented hotels upon arrival, some UASCs have gone missing. Despite efforts by a dedicated task force to locate them, the current number of missing children remains at 154, with no information on their

whereabouts (Jenkins, 2023, as cited in University of Bristol, 2023). The British charity *Every Child Protected Against Trafficking* (ECPAT UK) filed legal action against the Home Office, citing the unlawful and unsafe accommodation of unaccompanied children in these hotels, from which minors have gone missing, some allegedly kidnapped by gangs. Initially, over 400 UASCs were reported missing, with some believed to have been trafficked and remaining vulnerable to exploitation (Townsend, 2023). ECPAT UK won this legal challenge, with the High Court ruling that Kent County Council and the Secretary of State for the Home Department were in breach of their duties under the Children Act 1989 by unlawfully accommodating these children in hotels and denying them the protection of local authority guardianship (ECPAT UK, n.d.).

Further concerns regarding these hotel accommodations have emerged from reports by the Border Inspectorate, which revealed that staff made unaccompanied children play a game to guess which child would leave the hotel and be placed in a foster home next (Syal, 2024). The inspecting officer described this game as insensitive and clearly upsetting to the children. Additionally, it was reported that agency workers responsible for caring for children as young as nine years old had insufficient training and lacked proper background checks (Syal, 2024), raising serious concerns about the negligence surrounding the safety and care of these children.

This is also set against the broader backdrop of the current anti-immigration climate in the UK. In July 2024, in Southport, North England, three young children were killed in a knife attack at an event, with several others reported injured. A 17-year-old from a nearby village was arrested, and the police classified the incident as terror-related. Almost immediately after, social media was flooded with false claims speculating that the suspect was an asylum seeker who had arrived in the UK by boat in 2023 and that he was a Muslim. This information was incorrect, the suspect was, in fact, born in Wales to Rwandan parents. The misinformation sparked riots across the UK, targeting mosques and hotels housing asylum seekers (Golden & Moss, 2024).

It was estimated that 29 anti-immigration riots and demonstrations took place across 27 cities and towns in the UK, many of which turned violent. The National Police Chief's Council reported that 1,280 people were arrested, and 796 individuals were charged in connection with the riots. This was described as the most significant civil disorder in the UK since 2011 (Downs, 2024).

Earlier the same year, in April 2024, a man was arrested for attempting to murder an Eritrean refugee, who had arrived in the UK as an asylum seeker. The suspect claimed the attack was a form of protest against Channel migrants (Dawkins, 2024). These riots highlighted the role of social media in spreading misinformation, inciting hatred and violence, and the threats faced by migrants and asylum seekers in the UK (Golden & Moss, 2024).

1.2 Aims and Objectives of the Research

This research aims to address a gap in the existing literature, the under explored area of agency within asylum seeking and refugee populations, with a specific focus on unaccompanied young people. In some existing literature, agency can be seen as a by-product of other experiences like therapy, but has not the central focus of inquiry. While there are various ways to approach this topic, this research study aims to explore the experience of agency, noted in this research as action, in relation to choices, and the feeling of influence over one's circumstances. Additionally, this research attempts to go beyond the dominant trauma lens, which is an important field of inquiry in itself, but facilitates an examination of agency in young people's lives, and a more holistic approach. The central aim of this study is to explore if and how agency is experienced by UASC throughout the asylum process, until they are granted leave to remain. More specifically, the research seeks to understand what these experiences of agency look like, which factors foster or constrain agency, and how agency influences young people's self-perception during this period.

The primary research questions guiding this research were:

1. How is agency experienced, if at all, by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and young people until leave to remain is granted?

2. What are the possible facilitators in young people gaining a sense of agency during the asylum claim?
3. What are the possible barriers, if any, that lead to the loss of agency among UASC and young people during the asylum claim?
4. What role does agency play in the overall perception young people hold of themselves, and how has this perception been formed?

The research aims to contribute to an understanding of the lived experiences of unaccompanied young people in the UK within the current social and political climate, while also developing insights into working and collaborating with them. The research includes professionals with experience working with young people as secondary participants, contributing to the overall understanding of young people's experiences and time in the asylum system.

The research highlights the methodological intricacies of recruitment and the challenges involved, as well as the value of including young people in research within this sector. This study may be of interest to those working in the humanitarian and refugee sector, charities, and youth organizations, whether in direct support roles, fundraising or policy-making.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured as follows: The introduction sets the background and context in which this research takes place in the UK. It clarifies the focus of the

study, understanding the experiences of agency among unaccompanied young people seeking asylum until they receive legal status. Additionally, it outlines the research questions guiding this study.

Following the introduction, the thesis presents a critical examination of the literature related to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. This is followed by a psychosocial exploration of agency, leading to an identification of the gap in research, the underexplored relationship between agency and the experiences of unaccompanied children and young people. The structure of the literature review is designed to highlight this gap and situate the research within the broader academic discourse.

The methodology section provides a detailed account of the research design, describing how the study was conducted, the methods used for data collection and analysis, and the various stages of the research process. This section also discusses the ethical approvals sought, the inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants, and anonymized demographic details of those who took part in the study. Additionally, the methodology chapter foregrounds reflexivity and my positionality as a researcher, addressing my personal and professional interests in this research and how they inform my engagement with the topic.

The findings chapter then presents the rich data that emerged from participants' narratives, illustrating key themes that developed through the analysis. This is

followed by the discussion chapter, which critically examines the findings, bringing together perspectives from both sets of participants and synthesizing them within this research framework.

The thesis concludes with a coherent summary of the key findings and their contribution to the field, while also addressing the limitations of the study and the potential for further research. In doing so, it reflects on how these findings can inform future policy, practice, and academic discourse related to unaccompanied young people and their agency within the asylum system.

It is my hope that this structure provides a clear, logical progression of ideas, allowing for a cohesive and accessible presentation of this research study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review critically examines the key themes in research related to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and agency, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from sociology, psychology, social work, psychosocial studies, childhood and youth studies, immigration and politics, and refugee care.

The literature review is structured into three distinct sections. The first section explores existing literature on UASC, beginning with their context in the UK before examining relevant studies on their experiences through key themes identified in the current body of research. While the primary focus is on studies

conducted in the UK and Europe, literature from other regions is also included where it provides valuable insights into aspects such as the journeys undertaken or therapeutic work. This section also incorporates studies that examine the perspectives of professionals and key workers who support UASCs and young people, offering insight into the roles, challenges, and approaches involved in assisting this population.

The second section delves into the psychosocial exploration of agency, situating it within the broader research framework and analysing how agency is understood and conceptualized in relation to UASC and young people navigating asylum processes.

The final section examines the intersection of unaccompanied young people and agency within scholarly discourse, identifying gaps and underexplored areas in existing research. This structured approach lays the foundation for the study's focus on how UASC and young people experience and express agency within the UK asylum system and the perspectives and experiences of professionals who assist in this process.

Section 1 - Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

2.1 Introduction

I would like to begin with a definition of who an Unaccompanied asylum-seeking child is and provide some historical context before we delve further into understanding the nuances and reviewing relevant literature. The United Nations has defined Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASCs) as children who have been separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who is by custom or law responsible to do so. They are also referred to as unaccompanied minors. Separated children is another term that might be used interchangeably for instance, ‘‘ Unaccompanied or separated children are potentially more vulnerable to migration risks, due to their young age and unaccompanied status.’’ (Migration Data Portal, 2022, para.1)

According to UNHCR (n.d.), separated children, might be cared for by other relatives in the absence of parental care and protection. UASCs is the umbrella term that I will be using in this thesis with reference to children under the age of 18 years, who have had to seek asylum without their parental and legal guardians. I will also be using the term ‘young people’ to refer to those who sought asylum unaccompanied but since then have turned 18 years of age and legally considered adults.

As a unique group within the asylum-seeking population, they attract interest from various disciplines, such as social work, mental health, migration studies, human rights and humanitarian sector, childhood studies, and policy makers. Research on UASCs would therefore contribute significantly and the intention of this study is to focus on highlighting their lived experience.

2.2 Historical Context and Legal Framework

As United Nations Refugee Agency, UNHCR leads international efforts in protecting refugees. In February 1997, they issued Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum, which was to be used in conjunction with UNHCR guidelines on Refugee Children (1994) working under the principle of ‘best interests of the child’. These 1997 guidelines were set out to define the rights of unaccompanied children, the protection they are entitled to, the asylum process and their refugee status considerations under international law.

I would like to briefly summarize the important aspects of the 1997 guidelines in order to highlight the process UASCs go through while seeking asylum which will facilitate a better understanding of their experiences. UNHCR (1989) endorses the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

which prioritize the child's care and protection, always placing the best interests of the child first. Furthermore, UNHCR emphasizes the importance of ensuring effective protection and assistance to UASCs in a systematic and comprehensive way. According to UNHCR (1997), UASCs are considered vulnerable and should not be refused access to the territory in which they arrive. They must be assigned a legal representative. Two immediate processes include determining whether a child is unaccompanied and whether they are seeking asylum. The intention, according to the UNHCR (1997), is for UASCs to be assisted as soon as possible and are treated in an age-appropriate manner. This process also includes identifying if the child is not unaccompanied, in which case steps should be taken to facilitate a return or reunify them with family who might be seeking asylum in another country.

As soon as an unaccompanied child is identified, they must be assigned a guardian or adviser. The individual needs to be appropriately skilled in this responsibility and act as a link between the child and other services, coordinating care. Detailed documentation is strongly advised by UNHCR (1997, p.7), where unaccompanied children are registered through interviews. An initial interview or screening interview is used to collect their biographical data upon arrival or identification, as well as other useful information, such as family history and background, details around their separation from their family, about their health and wellbeing, etc.

There can be a further issue raised by authorities around age assessment at this time, however, UNHCR (1997) has advised this not just be based solely on physical appearance but on emotional and mental maturity, and this should be treated sensitively. This is done to assess needs, and as I understand, to ensure that adults are not housed with minors, as well as to address concerns from the Home Office about the asylum system being exploited. ‘‘Age assessments have been notoriously controversial in the UK’’ (Kvittingen,2010, p.4) and we can explore this in a later section.

UASCs are entitled to special care and protection and to maintain stability and avoid disruption; changes in accommodation should be kept at a minimum. The children should be allowed to live with their siblings, and their wellbeing should be ensured and assessed regularly, regardless of their living arrangement.

UASCs should not to be kept in detention and this should be considered a last resort with additional stipulations. Based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNHCR guidelines state that UASCs should have access to health facilities and treatment just as any other child in the country, and they should be provided qualified psychosocial support and counselling to facilitate recovery and integration. UASCs should also have access to education and be allowed to enroll in trainings and learning opportunities that would support their interests and promote their prospects.

UASC applications are encouraged to take priority, where fair decisions can be made quickly. They are also entitled to be informed of all relevant information and details in the process. As they are minors, a competent adult should be present to represent the child who has knowledge of their history. Usually this is their social worker or Foster Carer. They are also entitled to legal representation. The substantive interview is the main interview that follows the decision regarding their application. There are also appeals and timelines in place. The decision must take into consideration the unique child, their circumstances, history, context and the facts shared along with present situation in their home country, to determine the basis of well-founded fear of persecution. If granted refugee status, there would be a consideration of a durable solution, which may include long term placement, family reunification in a third country, resettlement, etc. If asylum is refused, an assessment based on best interests of the child will be conducted to find the most appropriate solution, which may include return or under protection and care of an adult or organization in the home country, etc.

As the UASCs are entitled to special protection, there have been further attempts to understand UASCs as a category to inform policy and practice.

UNHCR (2004) published a report on trends in Unaccompanied and separated children in Industrialized countries, which found that there is a difference in the pattern or 'flow' of unaccompanied and separated children seeking asylum to

other asylum seekers. Mapping trends from 2001-2003, the report found that most unaccompanied and separated children seeking asylum in Europe were more likely to be male around the age of 16 or 17 years old, and primarily from Afghanistan and Iraq. It was also found that UASCs were twice as likely to come from Africa compared to other asylum seekers. It was also noted that while there has been progress in collecting data of Unaccompanied and separated children from many asylum countries, there are still gaps in the reporting. One of the crucial findings was that a uniform international recommendation is not followed by different countries in the definition and categorization of unaccompanied children and separated children, which consequently limits a comparative analysis. For instance, Germany sets a limit of 16 years to be considered an unaccompanied or separated child rather than 18 years. In Spain, 17- and 18-year-olds are not included in the statistics, whereas in Netherlands, statistics include some who are older than 18 years of age (UNHCR,2004). This difference in uniform practice in definition and national procedure continues to pose a challenge in collecting accurate data on UASCs (Migration Data Portal, 2022).

Refugee status – Decision of being granted asylum, with limited leave to remain for five years, after which one can apply for settlement, i.e., indefinite leave to remain.

Humanitarian protection – This is in the case when asylum is refused due to not meeting criteria of the Refugee Convention, but may be at risk of a form of ill treatment in their home country, and therefore granted limited leave to remain for five years. They are able to apply for settlement after the five years.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child (UASC) leave – This is in the case when asylum refused but they are granted UASC leave for 30 months or until they are the age of 17.5 years, whichever is the shorter period. This status is granted when they do not qualify for refugee status or humanitarian protection, but in the situation where the Home Office cannot return them to their home country due to insufficient evidence of safety and reception arrangements in place. When UASC leave is granted, it is advised that the child be assisted in legal advice on appealing the decision. Before the UASC leave expires, they are eligible to submit an application for further leave or a fresh claim of asylum. In such cases, care and pathway planning should seriously consider the possibility of the child being returned to the home country if any subsequent appeal of asylum claim is not accepted. Planning should therefore cover all possibilities.

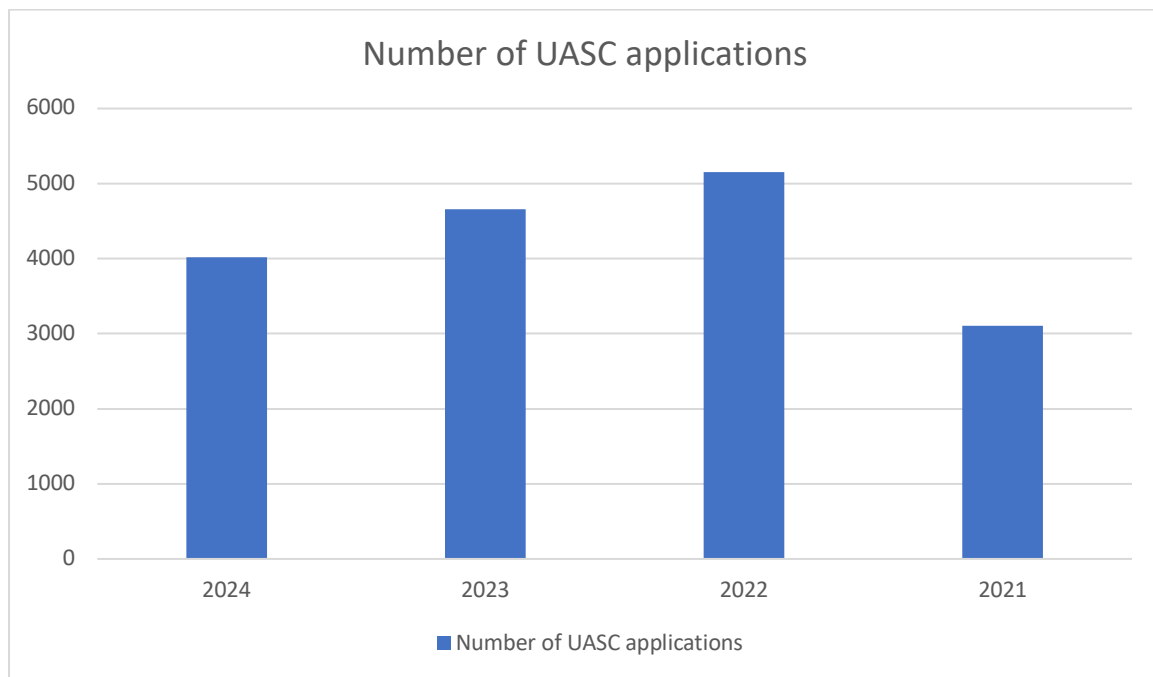
Refused asylum and granted no leave – In this case, the unaccompanied child has been refused asylum and is expected to return to their home country and

their care plan should address actions and support necessary. The Home Office would not be able to return the child if the appropriate reception arrangements are not in place in the home country.

Besides the main outcomes, other types of outcomes based on individual cases can include leave as a stateless person; limited or discretionary leave for compassionate reasons; and limited leave on the basis of family or private life.

Pathway plans for unaccompanied children and young adults should take into account what will happen if their asylum claim is refused and they do not receive legal status to stay in the UK. If their application for an extension is rejected or their appeal is unsuccessful, they will lose their legal right to stay and will be expected to plan for a return to their home country.

A return plan may also be needed if the young person chooses to leave the UK. Since their immigration status is uncertain, short-term goals should be set while waiting for a decision. For those who have not yet received an immigration ruling, transition planning should consider all possible outcomes and be updated as their case progresses (Department of Education, 2017).

Figure 2 – Number of UASC applications made in the UK

Source: Graph created by researcher with Data from the Home Office (2021, 2022, 2023, 2024)

The ways people can claim asylum in the UK are understood to be through two routes. One route, and the only one that the UK government encourages, is the legal route they offer which is through visas and schemes. The UK Home Office states they have been offering safe and legal routes to people who are in genuine need of protection from conflict and instability since 2015 (Home Office, 2023).

The UK Home Office currently offers the following schemes –

UK resettlement scheme – People are only able to come to the UK to claim asylum when their accommodation is in place. This scheme was introduced in 2021 and is open to refugees around the world. The following nationalities have been supported by this scheme - Ethiopia, Iraq, Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen.

Community Sponsorship- The community members can sponsor refugees resettled in the UK and support them with their new beginnings. This was launched in 2016.

Mandate Scheme – This is a global scheme launched in 1995 who have family members in the UK who are willing to accommodate them here in the UK.

Family reunion- Family Reunion visas allow partners and children under 17 years of age to join those granted refugee status or humanitarian protection in the UK if they formed part of a family unit before their sponsor fled the country.

Afghan citizens resettlement scheme- Termed as one of the most generous schemes in the UK history by the Home Office (2023), this scheme was to provide 20,000 Afghans at risk to be resettled in the UK and was launched in January of 2022. The separated families pathway under this scheme has closed as of 30th October 2024.

Afghan relocation and assistance policy- This scheme was created and launched in 2021, to assist Afghan nationals who worked for or with the UK government to be relocated.

Hong Kong British nationals- Launched in response to China's National Security Law, this is a visa scheme for British National Overseas (BNO) status holders and their families from Hong Kong to live, work and study in the UK.

Ukrainian schemes- These cover three visa schemes launches for Ukrainian nationals to have refugee in the UK which are a family scheme, sponsorship (homes for Ukraine) scheme and Ukraine visa extension scheme.

(Home Office, 2023)

The other route to seek asylum in the UK is referred to as the 'irregular' route or even called 'illegal' route. The UK Home Office (2024) acknowledges some of the irregular routes to be on small boats, arrival through a common travel area without valid permission to enter, through lorries and shipping containers, through regular routes but using fraudulent documents.

The number of people arriving via small boats has increased, whereas it was considered a rare phenomenon before 2019. Specifically with reference to UASCs, it was noted In the year ending June 2023, 8% of the asylum applications made by small boat arrivals were from UASCs (2,842 out of 36,169 applications). UASC applications from small boat arrivals made up 55% of all UASC applications in that year (2,842 of 5,186), and 35% of all UASC asylum applications between 2018 and June 2023 (Home Office,2023).

The sentiment within the humanitarian and charity sector is that the safe and legal routes to claim asylum are limited, and therefore people are forced to resort to dangerous journeys to seek asylum (IRC,2022). Majority of the UASCs I have worked with in my time at a Refugee charity, took irregular routes to arrive in the UK. It was important to briefly touch upon the routes to asylum in the UK as the asylum process itself is impacted by the current political landscape which we will discuss in the next section.

The National Transfer Scheme is one particular protocol in the UK established to support UASCs, i.e. children who are unaccompanied and who have applied for asylum; by enabling their safe transfer from one local authority to another. When it was introduced in 2016, it was a voluntary scheme for local authorities aimed at creating a more equitable distribution and sharing of responsibility for UASCs. In 2021, the scheme was made mandatory for all local authorities due to the insufficient response in proportion to the asylum intake (Home Office, 2023). It was also intended to end the use of hotel accommodations for UASCs as the asylum system feeling under pressure (Home Office, 2021). The scheme mandates swift intake of UASCs or transfers between authorities ensuring the provision of adequate support and care. This protocol was designed to implement again the best interests of the child, along with other relevant guidance on looked after children and unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

2.3.1 Political Landscape

In 2022, The Nationality and Border Act was passed in the United Kingdom, having been introduced as a bill in 2021. According to the Government, it set out to address aspects of nationality, immigration, asylum and human trafficking. While the Government claimed that the new provisions were to break the ‘economic model of people smugglers’, Refugee Council stated the Government provided no evidence for this nor did they take into full consideration the context of the asylum system (Refugee Council, 2023.). The Act categorizes refugees into Group 1 and Group 2, with people arriving through irregular routes being given temporary protection which restricts access to benefits and family reunification. According to the Refugee Council, this effectively creates a two tier system of refugee protection, where certain refugees have more rights than others based on how they travelled to the UK to claim asylum. The Refugee Council further claims that restricting family reunification for a group of refugees based on this act, would impact as many as 3500 people each year from joining their families, and 90% of those impacted being women and children (Refugee Council, 2023.). UNHCR has also stated that some provisions of this act are in breach of the Refugee Convention (IRC,2022).

This is indicative of a punitive measure for certain asylum seekers based on their route to claim asylum, even though multiple charities and organisations

have argued that there are not enough legal and safe routes in place to cater to all people, nationalities and groups fleeing persecution and seeking refuge. This can also impact on UASCs traveling through irregular routes, as many do, especially those who are age assessed to be older than they might actually be. Age assessments are addressed in more detail in a later section.

Further provisions in the Nationality and Border Act allow the UK to process asylum application offshore, that is to another third country. This has led to the push for the Rwanda Policy, which seeks to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, where they will stay while their asylum application are processed. However, it also means they are not meant to return to the UK. “Sending people seeking asylum offshore (most likely to less developed countries) undermines the Refugee Convention. It also shifts the UK’s obligations elsewhere, setting a dangerous precedent, which if other countries followed, would see majority of the people seeking asylum being sent to countries that have far less resources and infrastructure to support them.” (Refugee Council, 2023) This raises the question of what asylum means in the UK and whether asylum seekers and refugees are welcome to stay, or whether they are best suited “in less developed nations”. This perpetuates a further ‘othering’ of a population and carries a racialized and discriminatory undertone by implying that asylum seekers from other countries can be dealt with elsewhere and not in the UK. It is perhaps interesting to note this development from decades ago where Chakrabarti (2005)

found that there is an undermining of the concept of asylum itself, along with dehumanising policies, in their assessment of human rights culture in the UK at the time. ‘Political rhetoric relating to asylum seekers and refugees has been particularly damaging, not only to their interests, but to respect for Human Rights values generally. There is increasing talk of the rights and interests of British citizens rather than of universal Human Rights.’ (Chakrabarti, 2005, p. 146)

The Labour government came to power in the UK in July 2024. On its first day in office, the government scrapped the Rwanda scheme, a decision that was welcomed by refugee and humanitarian organizations. Additionally, the government committed to clearing the asylum backlog and reforming resettlement routes for those seeking protection in the UK (Evans, 2024).

A new Border Security, Asylum, and Immigration Bill has since been introduced. However, concerns have been raised regarding its implications. The Director of Asylum Matters criticized the bill for repeating past mistakes that have caused harm and cost lives, arguing that it fails to address key priorities, such as reducing asylum waiting times and allowing asylum seekers to work while their claims are processed. Furthermore, the CEO of the Refugee Council questioned the government’s approach to criminalizing those fleeing conflicts instead of introducing safe and legal pathways for asylum seekers. He emphasized that addressing the reasons people cross the Channel in small boats

requires policies that provide real alternatives to dangerous journeys (Ein, 2025).

Home Office guidance under the new Labour government states that applications for citizenship submitted from 10th February 2025 onwards will normally be refused for individuals who have entered the UK illegally, regardless of the time elapsed since this entry. This applies to those without electronic travel authorisations and to individuals who undertook ‘dangerous journeys’, including but not limited to small boat crossings or concealment in vehicles. The Scottish Refugee Council (2025) describes this as a disastrous move and arguing that, according to the 1951 Refugee Convention, asylum seekers and refugees should not be penalised for illegal entry. Furthermore, people make these difficult decisions due to absence of legitimate pathways to seek safety and should not be denied the same rights as other refugees. The change was implemented without scrutiny or consultation, contradicting international obligations, and the government should instead focus on providing safe routes (Scottish Refugee Council, 2025).

Syal (2025) reports that the Refugee Council estimates this policy could potentially bar 71,000 people who have successfully claimed asylum from obtaining UK citizenship. A UK barrister has also noted that this change constitutes a breach of International Law. However, the Minister of State at the Home Office defends this policy, arguing that it falls under good character

requirement and remains compliant with international obligations (Electronic Immigration Network, 2025).

There might be curiosity about how or why a person chooses to come to the UK to claim asylum, or whether asylum seekers have a choice about where they seek asylum. There are no mandates in place regarding where people should seek asylum in the world, nor are there restrictions on certain nationalities only being able to seek asylum in specific countries. Countries that are state parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, are required to fairly assess all applicants. Multiple charitable organizations have stated that a strong reason for people coming to the UK to claim asylum is due to family connections, and the desire to reunite with them (Refugee Action, n.d., British Red Cross, 2024). However, there are other reasons people come to the UK, such as knowing the language (Refugee Action, n.d., British Red Cross, 2024). In some cases, it is dictated by people smugglers who decide which safe country they will take individuals (British Red Cross, 2024) and people may have no prior knowledge of where they are going after desperately boarding a boat or lorry (Refugee Action, n.d.).

2.4 Relevant Studies

2.4.1 Context of Departures and Journeys for UASCs

One of the first initiatives to support unaccompanied children can be traced back to 1938, where the British introduced a scheme to provide sanctuary for 10,000 children, mostly Jewish and under the age of 17, to flee persecution in Europe. This was considered a 9-month rescue effort facilitated by many individuals and groups following the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938 (Goodman & Hacker, 2016). This initiative came to be referred as the Kindertransport in the late 20th century, which translates to ‘Children Transport’ in German. Holtman (2014) explains that the moral responsibility to respond to the humanitarian concerns at the time was only part of the decision, and that this action was taken in response to international and national criticism the government was receiving, as well as to satisfy Jewish organizations and others after the 1938 pogrom. It was also believed that unaccompanied refugee children would receive sympathy from the British public, with the understanding that they were temporarily residing in Britain to receive an education (Holtman, 2014). The intention behind the initiative was to reunite the children with their parents under better circumstances however it was noted that due to the persecution and mass killings of Jews in the war, this became mostly uncertain, and very few refugee children were ever reunited with their living relatives (The National Archives, n.d.). These children were appointed a

legal welfare guardian in 1944 and were eventually naturalized as citizens (Holtman, 2014).

Despite the various motivations driving the initiative, it evidently saved the lives of thousands of children who could have perished in the war. It is also a poignant reminder of the attempt and sacrifices made by parents to safeguard their children. A documentary called, 'My knees were jumping: Remembering the kinder transports' (1996) created by Melissa Hacker, shares stories of the children saved by this scheme, who recount their last memories of their parents before they departed for England. One woman recalls her father jumping back into the train, crying and screaming not to take their child away from him. This conveys the conflicted distress of parting ways with their children, trying to ensure their survival while being uncertain of their fate as a family and whether they would see their loved ones again.

This sub section is therefore aimed at understanding the context of departures and the journeys taken by unaccompanied children and to explore some of these underlying factors in more depth.

There was limited literature available when researching the pre-flight experiences of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children however, many articles reference their traumatic past. According to Ayotte (1998), witnessing violence

in some form and being separated from parents during a political unrest are major reasons for unaccompanied children's departure from their countries. Thomas et al. (2004) argued that not enough is known about the children's time before arriving in the host country, so they set out to conduct a study to understand the primary reasons why UASCs come to the UK and to explore the variety of experiences they have had before leaving their home country. The study included 100 UASCs, gathered through their legal statements, social service case notes and interviews, with consent obtained from the children and their social workers. The study found that the primary reason for flight was death or persecution of family members, with 86 participants having experienced some form of violence. There were further specific accounts of sexual and physical violence by many young people, including reports of sexual violence and rape towards males as well. Other reasons of flight included forced recruitments, instability and fear due to war and being trafficked for exploitation. It was noted that two thirds of the young people were able to talk about their experiences in interviews, while the rest said they were unable to for various reasons. The data was therefore supplemented by legal and asylum statements as well as social work notes (Thomas et al, 2004). It is important to note that not all young people found it possible to explain their circumstances before having to leave to seek asylum, with four young people reporting they did not even know why they had to leave. Other young people shared that they needed to keep it a secret, with some sharing a generic reason of having

problems. As evidenced in the study, most UASCs are exposed to violent and fearful experiences, leading to their departure. Due to such experiences, it would be rational to consider that these experiences cannot always be conveyed whether in part, or full or at all to others, especially with the desire to not re-live the memories.

The exact reason for departure is also fraught with some ambivalence for many young people. In the context of research, young people may have both conscious and unconscious motivations for sharing or withholding their experiences during interviews.

Another study by Hopkins & Hill (2008) confirms previous findings, demonstrating that unaccompanied minors experience a range of ‘traumatic situations’ in their countries such as the death or persecution of family members, war, forced recruitment and personal persecution.

In a paper by Raddatz & Kerby (2020), there is a case illustration of 13-year-old Hani’s difficult experience of becoming a refugee. Hani along with four other girls in rural Somalia, was threatened by Al Shabab rebels to be enslaved as wives, which led them to decide to flee to Kenya. Sadly, while they were on the way, the girls were raped by a group of Al Shabab rebels and were held tied up with ropes. One night they managed to escape, but soon Hani found out she was pregnant. Her troubles continued in Mombasa, where she faced daily harassment and lived in fear of state authorities due to being Somalian. The

study found that unaccompanied refugee children face violence and discrimination from state authorities, who are meant to protect them, further subjecting vulnerable groups seeking safety to violence (Raddatz & Kerby, 2020). Therefore, unaccompanied refugee children in this context face threats and violence not only pre-flight and, on their journeys, but also upon arrival at their destination. Visible ethnic minorities in this study reported experiencing higher levels of state perpetrated violence.

In a report published by Amnesty International UK, The Refugee Council and Save the Children (2019) on the impact of family separation on child refugees in the UK, it was found that many of the child refugees had endured appalling horrors, including torture, killing of loved ones and the destruction of homes. This report highlighted accounts of many unaccompanied children's ordeals and included experiences of children fleeing from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Sudan and Syria. The report states that accounts heard from children listed various human rights violations identified by the UNHCR as being of grave concern; "Genocide and ethnic cleansing, living in besieged cities, bombing, artillery attacks, killings, maiming, persecution and terror, formed the extreme and everyday realities of children's lives. Violence and threats to their life, liberty and security were recurring themes in the children's descriptions of what triggered their flight from their home countries" (Amnesty International UK, The Refugee Council, Save the Children, 2019, p.9).

Furthermore, the report states that child refugees, much like adult refugees, are left with no choice but to make dangerous journeys to find safety. These are horrific accounts of experiences of unaccompanied children found through extensive research and reporting by leading humanitarian organizations that work closely with refugees and asylum-seeking populations. These findings should alert us to the risks and dangers many of the children are exposed to in the precarious times, as well as the experiences UASCs bring with them when they arrive in host countries. While the studies and reports suggest the past experiences of unaccompanied children, they were not prematurely labelled as ‘traumatized’. However, there was a suggestion for further care, support, care, adaptation and a focus on resilience and strengths.

Nardone & Correa-Velez (2015) stated that the refugee journey in itself has not been fully investigated as a significant event, even though it has lifelong consequences. Furthermore, it is one of the most significant processes of being and becoming a refugee (BenEzer & Zetter, 2015 as cited in Nardone & Correa-Velez, 2015) and the authors urging a better understanding of irregular migrant journeys. Nardone and Correa-Velez (2015) conducted a study examining interviews of 17 participants, who had arrived in Australia through irregular routes, were about 16 years of age and had been living there for about 2 years. The majority of the unaccompanied children had lived in neighboring countries before arriving in Australia and faced some sort of discrimination there, which

was a driving factor for their further movement to Australia. The decision to leave their home countries was made through a combination of factors involving their parents, families and themselves. Some participants expressed worry and concern for their families after arriving and displayed continued anguish, even though their physical journey had ended. While the primary motivator was protection, there were other underlying factors, such as the desire for a better life. The authors (2015) stated the journeys were unpredictable, with the children experiencing short lived company and friendships along the way, alongside issues of trust towards smugglers. The authors found the unaccompanied children showed great capacity to cope despite their vulnerability. There was an emphasis on the need to protect unaccompanied children during their journeys (Nardone & Correa-Velez, 2015). This research sought to add more layers and depth to the journeys taken by unaccompanied children seeking asylum, which helps illuminate a particularly long and challenging period in these young people's lives. It is important to note that the resourcefulness and resilience of the young people on their journeys were recognized, and they were not simply labeled as vulnerable. A limitation of the study, as acknowledged by the authors, was that all the participants were male, so the results cannot be generalized to females and their journeys. Additionally, the sample was limited to 17 young people.

2.4.2 In the Host Country

Literature that constitutes the experience of various facets of UASC life in the host country has been categorized here under themes and explored. This includes the experience of asylum processing, services and support available and accessible to them, and their everyday lives.

UASCs wait for their substantive asylum interview to take place as it determines whether their claim is successful. In my own interactions and work with UASCs, as well as communicating with other key workers, there is no set timeline for when this interview takes place. There is no consistency, some individuals may have their appointment within months while others may wait for a year or more. The COVID 19 pandemic also created a backlog of asylum applications in the UK, which delayed interviews and the processing of claims for a significant amount of time. The Migration Observatory (2023) reported data compiled by the Asylum Information Database (AIDA), at the end of 2021, indicated that the UK had the second largest asylum backlog which stood at 101,000 applications. Germany, on the other hand, had largest backlog in Europe, with 108,000 people waiting a decision. Considering the weight asylum interviews hold for subsequent decisions, there is some research looking at what these interviews are like for UASCs and young people.

The term 'Culture of disbelief' has been used quite often to describe the nature of asylum in the UK. Anderson et al. (2014) argues that this forestalls the provision of protection to those who need it, with the Freedom from Torture (2020) stating that, 'the culture within the Home Office has created an environment of disbelief, scepticism and suspicion that has crept into the interview room' (Freedom from Torture, 2020, p.38). If indeed this nature of disbelief, scepticism and suspicion permeates the asylum system, it is likely to have a conscious and unconscious impact on proceedings related to those seeking asylum.

Crystal (2008) argues that unaccompanied and separated children's testimony during interviews should be presumed credible unless specifically proven otherwise, with due consideration given to the child's age and maturity, their possible limited understanding of their country's circumstances, their challenging experiences and their ability to communicate. Further, the author emphasizes the need for greater protection of these children under asylum law but expresses serious concern that these conditions are not being met.

Similarly, a report by the Children's Society (n.d.) found that young people's experience of asylum interviews was stressful, confusing and upsetting, with children feeling that there were too many questions and the process took too long. Children also reported difficulty in understanding questions, which can be

seen as further evidence that the children centred approach was not being put into practice.

It is common practice to have interpreters during asylum interviews to facilitate communication and expression. Research conducted by Keselman et al. (2008) found that both the interviewers and interpreters contributed to inaccurate information being elicited and translated due to their methods, which did not adequately serve the unaccompanied children. This led to altered content, which could have impacted asylum applications. The Children's Society (n.d.) also stated that interpreters lacked experience working with children in asylum proceedings and had insufficient understanding of the asylum process. Children reported unable to engage with questions being translated and not being provided with interpreters speaking the correct dialect.

Crawley (2010) through their research emphasizes that the UK asylum system does not create conditions that allow an asylum seeking child to articulate their experiences in these proceedings and gain protection they are entitled to. In fact, these children are often seen with contempt and perceived as a threat to immigration controls. Crawley (2010) stresses the significance and urgency of a child centred asylum approach, which truly allows children to be heard, listened to, and acknowledged in having a voice. Rap (2023) also confirmed this, and by stating that more information should be provided to children about the process

and better communicative techniques should be implemented. I did not come across research indicating that unaccompanied children share positive or neutral experiences, suggesting that so far the experience of asylum interviews has generally been found to be a challenging requirement, deemed unfriendly, uncontainable and even re-traumatizing failing to meet established standards.

2.4.3 Age Assessments

When an unaccompanied minor arrives in the UK, the Home Office conducts an initial age assessment to determine whether they are, or could be, a child, as the majority of UASCs do not have documented evidence of their age (Sella, 2023). According to this report, the process involves two Home Office officers visually assessing the child and, based on their appearance and demeanour, making a judgment on whether they are a minor. This highlights the arbitrary nature of the initial age assessment. No social workers are required to be present, and there are very few safeguards in place. The assessment is conducted at the time of the UASC's arrival, following a journey that may have lasted months, if not years. If deemed an adult at this stage, the young person is treated as an adult and placed in adult accommodation. The responsibility then falls on the young person and those assisting them to refer the case to the local authority, which can conduct its own assessment to determine the individual's age. If the local authority, through its own inquiry, deems the young person to be a minor, they

are taken into care and treated as a UASC. While the local authority remains the primary assessor of age, under recent legislation that came into effect in March 2023, full age assessments can now be referred to the National Age Assessment Board. This board consists of social workers employed by the Home Office to carry out full age assessments (Sella, 2023). The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) (2024) has opposed these measures in both parliamentary acts and released a public statement urging social workers not to work for the Home Office. Their concerns include the politicization of the age assessment process and the motivations behind it. Additionally, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration has launched an inspection into the Home Office's use of age assessments, which BASW has welcomed (BASW, 2024).

Full age assessment includes further methods to assess age in age disputed cases, which are not supported by the scientific community, like 'examining and measuring parts of a person's body' and 'the analysis of saliva, cell or other samples taken from a person'. This is believed to lead to more incorrect assessments of children as adults exposing them to risk and vulnerability (Refugee Council, 2023). The Refugee Council (2022) states that the age dispute process is putting children at risk and refutes the Home Office's claims that adults are posing as children to take advantage of the asylum system. The report demonstrates that many young people claiming to be children are, in fact, telling the truth. It further highlights the harm caused to children in age-disputed

cases, particularly when they are accommodated with adults, lack basic care and safety, and are denied the protection they deserve and are entitled to. The report argues that this exposure puts children at risk of exploitation, abuse, and both mental and physical harm.

In 2021, only 14 out of 233 age-disputed children were found to be adults, whereas the majority were actually children, despite the Home Office's certainty in classifying them as adults (Refugee Council, 2022). Furthermore, the report details that the Home Office does not keep statistics on young people they initially treat as adults or what happens to them (Refugee Council, 2022), even though the Home Office itself has acknowledged a high margin of error in initial assessments (Sella, 2023).

Sauer et al. (2015) identify three key considerations for physicians when a young asylum-seeking individual's age is contested: ethical, medical, and legal concerns. Ethical questions: The justifications for a physician's involvement in the process when there is no medical necessity for it, whether the individual's consent is obtained and given freely, and how patient-doctor confidentiality is maintained when providing an opinion to authorities. Medical questions: Whether there is a reliable method for age assessment, how invasive the procedure is, and the margin of error involved. Legal questions: How plausible it is to use 18 years as the cut-off for distinguishing between a minor and an

adult, and how this Western notion of childhood and adulthood applies to young people from different societies and cultures. The questions raised offer a strong argument, with the authors concluding that paediatricians across Europe should not participate in the age determination process. They further emphasize that this position should be clearly communicated to all paediatricians and that opposition to the procedure should be conveyed to the relevant authorities.

Building on an earlier point made by Sauer et al. (2015), the social constructions of childhood and adulthood are not fixed across societies and cultures; rather, they vary over time (Cipriani, 2009; James & Prout, 1990, as cited in Kenny & Loughry, 2018). Furthermore, each child follows a different developmental trajectory, shaped by factors such as gender, personality, genetics, class, race, and childhood experiences (Kenny & Loughry, 2018). This is an important consideration for the arbitrariness of using the age of 18 as the dividing line between childhood and adulthood. I would like to acknowledge that this notion also plays out in this research, as 18 years of age became the inclusion criterion for research participation. The majority of the world recognizes this as the legal age of adulthood and the age of consent (World Population Review, 2024).

McLaughlin (2018) highlights the politicization of childhood, arguing that at the heart of the politics of rescue lie race and gender, which determine who is deemed worthy of protection. The author contends that children became the face

of the humanitarian crisis in 2015 and 2016, with Britain relying on vulnerability, innocence, and passiveness as key determinants of who deserved help and support, while silently excluding others deemed less vulnerable.

A poignant point is made by Hopkins and Hill (2010), who highlight how the bodies of unaccompanied minors are contested, how their skin colour and physical appearance factor into the level of support and resources they receive. The ways in which unaccompanied minors' bodies are read, interpreted, and responded to are linked to the negative media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees and the broader lack of understanding surrounding these issues.

Cemlyn and Nye (2012) acknowledge the contentious nature of age assessments, highlighting the tension between social workers prioritizing the rights of young people and the demands of immigration control and policies. Their research emphasizes the crucial role social workers can play in broader political movements to protect asylum seekers while maintaining core humanitarian values in their practice. Hopkins and Hill (2010) stress that unaccompanied minors must first be regarded as children and only then as asylum seekers. This distinction plays a significant role in how they are perceived as deserving of care and protection, with broader implications for policy and practice.

2.4.4 Education

Each unaccompanied child is likely to have a unique perspective on their experience of education, whether it is in their home country or the host country where they have applied for asylum. All UASCs are entitled to education and in my interactions with them in a professional capacity, it has come across as something that holds a lot of meaning for them. “For refugee children, teachers and school assume enormous importance, becoming their substitute family and home” (Fox,1995, p.249).

A study was conducted by Ofsted (2003) between 2001 and 2003 to evaluate the impact of the arrival of asylum seeking children in 37 schools across 11 Local Education Authorities (LEA). This is interesting because the focus here is the impact on schools, and it could be useful to consider the quality of support, resources, guidance available as well as the need to address shortcomings in these areas. While schools in London had experience hosting asylum seeking students, many schools in dispersal authorities had little to no experience with this. The findings from the study noted that schools were committing time and effort towards the integration of asylum seeking students. While some schools had good arrangements for inducting them and providing support, others were less informed about the appropriate guidance and support to do so (Ofsted, 2003). Furthermore, schools in dispersal authorities initially struggled to create

an appropriate curriculum for asylum seeking students, unsure of the support needed by both students and teachers, as the students were new to English.

There was no appropriate training in place to identify students who need further psychological support or to provide teachers with knowledge about student's cultural and language backgrounds. Some schools had good support and training in place, which enabled teachers and staff to provide high quality support to students who performed very well in a short period of time (Ofsted, 2003). As the study highlights, the resources and training provided to schools impact the efficiency of institutions in implementing appropriate arrangements and processes to support asylum seeking students.

A noteworthy consideration is that UASCs are accessing educational institutions and attending classes while waiting for a decision on their application. It is important to reflect on how that impacts UASCs experience of access, participation and inclusion. Pinson and Arnot (2010) make the point that without necessarily having citizenship status, UASCs are often seen as outsiders in educational institutions (as cited in Ward, 2022). Furthermore, the right to education can mean little in terms of educational attainment if individuals feel like societal outsiders (Ward, 2022) who can never fully participate in the education system (Arnot & Swartz, 2012). Ward (2022) argues that this feeling of not belonging directly impacts UASCs' ability to attain education and fully benefit from these spaces. The point is also made that this belonging and

inclusion can be positively affected through social networks in an educational institution, for instance, by finding reliable teachers in schools (Blackwell & Melzac, 2000, as cited in Ward, 2022). Fostering helpful relationships between UASCs and teachers can lead to UASCs' learning and academic growth (Ward, 2022).

Hek and Sales (2002) conducted a study to examine the impact of education on the settlement of young refugees and the factors that helped them achieve better academic outcomes. The study was based on interviews with 15 students from two London based schools, who had either received refugee status, obtained another kind of status or were still seeking asylum. The study did not specifically state whether any of these participants were unaccompanied children. However, the study identified several key factors that contributed to students' success: support from specialist teachers, general support, friendships with other students, not limited to just other refugee children, and an inclusive and positive attitude towards refugees by both the school and its teachers and students. All of these factors contributed to a sense of belonging and improved overall performance and achievement in school (Hek, 2005).

In another study based in a vocational college in Malta, Spiteri (2015) interviewed 10 participants, 8 were unaccompanied asylum seeking minors while 2 were accompanied by their families, all of whom had their claims rejected. The results of the study revealed a connection between the

participants' feelings of underlying uncertainty and their perceptions of themselves. There was a sense of loneliness even among those who had come with family, as well as a lack of feeling loved and cared for due to the difficult circumstances. Another finding pointed to the impact of family perception of education and connections on the participants motivation toward their studies and future career choices. For the unaccompanied minors, financial stress was a significant factor in their ability to continue with college studies, further compounded by the need to move out of supported housing once they turned 18. "They recounted how, as minors, they were encouraged to attend MCAST by the staff of the 'residential homes', how they were offered tuition, how they were offered social work assistance, and how they were made to feel that they were people who mattered and were significant to others. " (Spiteri, 2015, p. 168). This highlights the tremendous value asylum- seeking young people place on the support staff in the residential housing they live in, and the significant impact they staff have on their educational endeavours.

Fuller & Hayes (2020) set out to explore the educational experiences of UASCs in the UK, referred to as UASMs (unaccompanied asylum seeking minors) in their paper. The authors aimed to build on prior research such as that by Brownlees and Finch (2010), who found that education was a priority for all the unaccompanied minors they interviewed. Education, they argued, served as a way to build connections and relationships and a significant means of

overcoming loneliness. Mels et al (2008) (as cited in Fuller & Hayes, 2020) found education to be a form of social support for unaccompanied asylum seeking boys, but UASCs face barriers to education, including sometimes having to wait over 3 months to gain admission to a college placement (Gladwell & Chetwynd, 2018 as cited in Fuller & Hayes, 2020). In their own research, Fuller & Hayes (2020) conducted semi structured interviews with 6 participants and found that education facilitated their experience of socializing, served as a means of learning English, determined better future prospects in the UK, and was affected by external stressors within the asylum system. They also expressed a desire for more resources to learn and study at their own pace. This is helpful in understanding the important role education plays in the everyday lives of unaccompanied children and young people, and how it can serve as a medium of imagining and building a future in their host country.

Building on the earlier study, Codina and Szenasi (2022) also stated that local authorities in England are rarely able to find school placements for newly arrived unaccompanied children aged 15-16. They analysed one local authority's bespoke program to address this issue. There were interesting points to take away from this study, which sought to understand the experience of UASCs in terms of social inclusion. The results of the study highlighted the program as being hospitable, built on the foundation of learning English in practical environments, within groups and through sports, resulting in

increasing spaces of belonging for the young people. The Unaccompanied Sanctuary Seekers Team (USST) responsible for this program in the study, focused on building a bond with the young people and aimed to make the support accessible. Codina and Szenasi (2022) stated this inclusive approach would be beneficial as a bridge to mainstream schooling and for schools to develop their own programs such as this one. “An offer such as this could address constructions of the unaccompanied sanctuary seeker as ‘vulnerable’ and provide opportunities for the whole school community to learn” (Codina & Szenasi, 2022, p. 15).

One key learning identified by the authors was a limitation in their ethical design, which they highlighted through the concept of ‘migratory indebtedness’ by Iqbal et al (2021). A similar sense of this issue is explored within research in the section on working with gatekeepers.

2.4.5 Social and Cultural Dynamics of Care, Belonging and Identity

Some crucial experiences for UASCs and young people can be seen as those in relation to social and cultural dynamics in the host country. For instance, Kohli (2011) examined three pathways taken by unaccompanied children and young people in the country of asylum: looking for safety, their sense of belonging and their will to succeed. Kohli (2011) states that, to some extent children and young people are able to find some level of safety in their daily lives with the

help of routines, activities and relationships. However, this is further determined by the legal status they receive; permanent status, temporary status or return to their home country. There is also not enough research to confirm what ‘a safe return’ looks like (Kohli, 2011) and definitely a point for further exploration, as it is indeed one of the possible outcomes for UASCs and young people.

In terms of a sense of belonging, while this is contributed to by formal and informal groups around UASCs and young people, it also about how they use their talents and capacities as well as their relationship to their faith (Kohli, 2011). Interesting points made towards in relation to this are this are that religion activates and sustains a sense of belonging through a powerful sense of God (Goodman, 2004 as cited in Kohli, 2011) and that it helps young people cope, providing solace and continuity (Ni Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010; Whittaker et al., 2005 as cited in Kohli, 2011).

The third pathway Kohli (2011) examines is success which naturally includes a positive asylum claim, but also encompasses the desire of young people to do well educationally and materially (Kohli and Mather, 2003 as cited in Kohli, 2011). Further, Kohli (2011) states that safety, belonging and success are interdependent, and impacted by the uncertainty UASCs and young people experience.

A fascinating contrast is that while Kohli (2011) discussed how UASCs and young people being able to practice their own religion helped them cope in hostile environments, and their belief in God representing something familiar in a unfamiliar environment (Ni Raghallaigh, 2011), Morgan (2020) noted conversion to Christianity for UASCs and young people in Sweden as a form of belonging and agency. From the young people's narratives, many originally from Muslim backgrounds, it was interesting to note that they found a sense of belonging through the church community. These UASCs and young people actively sought conversations and wisdom from the priests, participated in events and activities, performed acts of worship and spent time connecting with other converts from their background (Morgan,2020). Most of the young people were curious about Christianity through their experiences in Sweden and through interactions with other practicing Christians. As Morgan (2020) stated, "In each of the cases above, conversions do not happen in isolation but as part of a community- embedded process. It is, in many ways, the product of networks of relationships rather than of an individual process, of belonging before believing." (p. 49).

In considering religion's impact on experience, Ekström et al. (2020) brings forth the lived experience of unaccompanied female minors in everyday religious practices in Sweden as they navigated their asylum journeys. The young women were negotiating and re negotiating their own relationships with

the understanding of their faith, but it was evident that the belief in God was central to their identity (Ekström et al, 2020). For some, faith had become more even more valuable in their everyday lives as people seeking asylum in a new country (Frederiks, 2016; Ni Raghallaigh, 2007 as cited in Ekström et al., 2020). The young women were seen to defend their faith but also became aware of being ‘othered’ as individuals practicing a different religion, especially Islam, which was often associated with terrorism. The young women were also fending off stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed and victims of their religion, by asserting their own wish and choice to wear the hijab for instance. While religion was seen as crucial to their identity, the unaccompanied young women found ways to question their own understanding of religion and how they would like to practice it, an opportunity which may not have been available to them in their home country. A poignant statement made by some young women was also that they did not feel the need to explain their religion or choice of practice to others if they did not understand it. However, they also wanted to prove their worth as contributing and successful members of society. Further, religion can serve as an important way to gain trust and openness through conversation and understanding for those working with these young unaccompanied minors (Ekström et al, 2020).

Just as we recognize factors that facilitate trust as valuable, mistrust on the other hand, can erode a sense of belonging that young asylum seekers are trying to

establish within their host communities. Raghallaigh (2013) examined the causes of mistrust among unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people in Ireland and found that these causes were related to 'social trust' i.e. trust in individuals. Determined by individual experiences, the young participants varied in their responses about the ability to trust others, with most finding it quite difficult to do so. Many of the young people based this difficulty on past experiences from their home countries, having witnessed difficult events, betrayals or negative relationships. This mistrust seemed to be compounded by the agents or smugglers with whom young people had travelled, who often do not share information about their journeys or destinations. These young people also arriving in a country with a 'culture of disbelief' (as mentioned by various organisations like Irish Refugee Council, 2003, as cited in Raghallaigh, 2013) which further complicates the dynamics of trust. They are often mistrusted by others such as the officials of the host country and/or the system itself. Raghallaigh (2013) highlights this environment of mistrust as one that is not conducive to young people being able to share the truth and details of their lives, with a looming fear of negative consequences. The study concludes that for most of the unaccompanied children and young people in the study, their ability to trust had been severely impacted or damaged. Raghallaigh (2013) suggests that professionals working with them should understand their perspectives and work to repair and develop trust through a relationship and credibility based approach.

Concerns about truth telling (Raghallaigh, 2013) directly relate to Kohli's (2006) research on the silences maintained by unaccompanied children and young people when interacting with professionals or authorities in host countries. Some relevant research cited by Kohli (2006) in this context includes Melzak (1992) who stated that war silences children, and that silences are a way of dealing with distress and surviving deep, unclear losses caused by past and present circumstances, which lead unaccompanied children to remain silent (Green, 2000), Papadopoulos (2002) suggests that refugees purposefully remain silent during situations or post displacement as a way of healing over time. Kohli (2006) noted that social workers working with the young people found them reluctant to share, while some not discussing their past lives at all. For some social workers, the silence of young people, which was riddled with grief of shock and trauma, was the most worrying. Some young people were told not to speak in order to avoid negatively impacting their asylum claims, while others chose to focus on their present lives and resettlement, deciding not to dwell on the past. However, some young people did choose to share their stories even if they contained confusion and limited understanding of what was happening. It was interesting that the social workers were unsure of what was private and what was a secret. In this respect, the social workers found different ways to work with the young people within the context of the silences and what was not being said. One group of Social workers focused on supporting the

young people with the practicalities of everyday life and knew very little about the young people's prior lives. Another group took on a therapeutic approach, understanding that silences were being used for the young people's coping and management. The third group of social workers seemed to become more trusted companions of the young people and genuinely cared about their wellbeing. These social workers understood that the young people were living in a dilemma, not being able to share their whole truths and restricting themselves to sharing 'thin stories' due to the nature of the asylum process, which could be burdensome for the young people (Kohli, 2006).

With the complexity of trust, mistrust and silences intertwined, another useful consideration is the loneliness experienced by unaccompanied young people (Herz & Lalander, 2017). Herz and Lalander (2017) state that unaccompanied children and young people have been ascribed an identity of being lonely, but their own perspectives of this has not been considered in research. They attempted to bridge this gap through their own study, and the results indicated that young people do experience loneliness, due to being excluded in the host society by authorities, language and communication gaps and a lack of control within the system (Herz & Lalander, 2017). The researchers argued that the young people do not carry loneliness as an inherent identity of being alone without their parents, but it is as a result of being marginalized: "Not feeling valued or cared for could create feelings of loneliness, isolation and passivity"

(Herz & Lalander, 2017, p. 1071). The feelings of loneliness seemed to be countered by relationships and social bonds the young people were able to form, with peers, family and friends across borders, as well as support staff. A poignant take away from the study is the impact of labelling. The young people felt that when they were labelled as ‘unaccompanied children’, they were being categorized as a certain kind of lonely child, always seen through that label, which contributed to the young people feeling ‘othered’. ‘‘Being labelled as unaccompanied or alone seems to further reinforce feelings of loneliness and even shape the young people’s sense of self, in terms of identity’’ (Herz and Lalander, 2017, p.1074). According to Lems et al. (2020), unaccompanied refugee youth are constantly seen as ‘figures in crisis’ and reduced to labels and numbers.

As indicated above, labelling can influence self-perception and shaping one’s own identity. A point of contemplation is whether the label of being ‘unaccompanied’ or being seen as young asylum seekers has a larger impact on identity formation and informs the treatment towards them. Romero (2022), through an examination of media articles and reports, found that anti-immigration protestors framed unaccompanied children in the United States as ‘criminals’, a danger to others, as a threat to the economy, carriers of disease and as ‘invaders’. These categorizations imply a form of dehumanisation and Romero (2022) states that these children were portrayed as undeserving of

protection and an ordinary childhood. Due to their origins in South America and Mexico, and with the repeated framing of them as ‘invaders’, they were seen as ‘racialised threats’ (Romero, 2022). This indicates a racist and prejudiced attitude towards asylum seekers and immigrants and in this case, children are also not exempt from this categorization. Further evidence of racist attitudes towards unaccompanied asylum seeking children can be found in Migliarini’s (2018) qualitative study in Italy. The study highlighted racist and prejudiced attitudes exhibited by white Italian professionals working in refugee organisations. Migliarini (2018) argued that race is something that is completely unacknowledged, terming this as ‘colour evasiveness’ in Italian Society, which further maintains and strengthens a white supremacist ideology. Asylum seeking children in this study were considered less abled than others; overrepresented as those with special needs and outside of the normative educational system. This is indicative of an attempt to homogenising a diverse group. It is important to note that professionals working with this population exhibited discriminatory and racist attitudes towards asylum seeking and refugee children without being aware of their biases, their roots and their implications.

Chak (2018) highlights the exploitation of unaccompanied children in Europe, providing yet another piece of research that shines light on discriminatory practices towards this population. Chak (2018) notes that Europe has failed its duty and obligation to protect and provide for unaccompanied asylum seeking

children, with thousands of these children were living in negligent and appalling conditions, and being violently and sexually exploited. Posing a similar quandary around duties and obligations, or in this case failure to enforce them, Rigby et al (2021) note the divisive nature of policies and categorizations of ‘UASCs’ in the UK that contributes to larger issues.

Through current literature, this section can be seen to highlight the intersectional dynamics of identity and belonging with respect to unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people.

2.4.6 Working with Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children and Young People and Professional Practice

During their time in the host country, UASCs and young people directly communicate with and rely on certain key staff and professionals that hold responsibilities towards their care and support. In the attempt of locating literature relevant to highlighting UASC experience, there are considerable articles that bring forth the experience of these staff and professionals which offer valuable insight into the functioning of the systems and care in place, but also the impact they have in UASC and young people’s lives. This section looks at some of the research on professional practice and experience of working with UASCs and young people like Social Services and Fostering.

Fostering children comes with its unique challenges. One might consider whether fostering UASCs and young people would be a very distinct experience or not. Foster Talk (2020) claim that these young people have additional needs alongside the basic needs of any other child coming into foster care. For instance, traumatic experiences of home country and journey, immigration needs, language barriers and cultural adjustment, isolation and fear about future prospects (Foster Talk, 2020).

Wade et al (2012) and Rip et al (2020) found young people had limited to no understanding of foster care. Exploring the nature of foster placement and the perspectives of those involved, Wade et al (2020) found Foster Carer's experienced challenges which included not feeling prepared or lacking confidence in this role. However, many of them expressed a satisfaction of their fostering experience and the training they received. Young people's experience here depended on the type of relationships the foster carers were able to build with them, and they felt constrained in the situations where there were lack of emotional connections. I think this research presented important insight into the fostering experience as well as more information on its accessibility to only a small percentage of minors (Wade et al, 2012). Further suggesting the importance of foster care relationships, De Greave (2015) in a research study in Belgium found that guardians of unaccompanied minors and their foster carers

can be a form of social capital that can increase their feelings of belonging and integration.

Luster et al (2009), Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh (2015) and Rip et al (2020) pointed to a gap or limited research about experiences of unaccompanied children in foster care. All these studies also pointed to the significance of cultural continuity and having similar cultural background of foster parents as a supportive factor for the unaccompanied minors.

As interesting and unique studies in their own right, here is further exploration of their findings.

Luster et al (2009) highlighted the complexity of relationships between the young people and foster carers. This research focused on the experience of Sudanese unaccompanied minors who were resettled in the US. This was interesting as the minors were living in refugee camps with their peers before being resettled into placements with foster parents, i.e., having more authority or parental figures. Luster et al (2009) found that most of these placements were marked with conflicts and misunderstandings and these challenges led to half of the young people who participated in the study to change placements. The authors cited cultural differences, difficulty in accepting parental authority and issues around autonomy and trust as some of the factors. However, at the time of the interviews, most of the young people reported having positive

relationships with at least one of the foster parents and that more time in the host country and their development and adjustment could have contributed to better relationships with foster parents.

Raghalahaigh & Sirriyeh (2015) focused on two studies, one conducted in England and one in Ireland. The young people were from a variety of different placements, having foster parents from the same religion or country, or with British or Irish foster parents and different combinations of this. The importance of culture came through for the young people with continuity of cultural familiarity and practice with similar background carers but also with carers of host country origin who made an effort to facilitate this connection for the young people. Interestingly but not surprisingly, young people valued the personality and nature of carers despite their cultural background and social workers in this research shared that cross cultural placements were effective when carers valued diversity and were committed to young people's development. It was noted that placements with carers from same background allowed the continuity of language which could not take place in other placements. Another further extension to cultural practice was the food. It was observed that this was more challenging to negotiate with cross cultural placements but with Carers including and encouraging young people, this was overcome. It was noted to be particularly challenging in the month of fasting of Ramadan with different times of eating and routine for the young people.

Based in Netherlands, Rip et al (2020) study includes participation from unaccompanied minors (former and current), foster carers and social workers and is reported to be the first Dutch and triangulated study to understand foster placement success. The results highlighted the unaccompanied minors and foster carers valued the cultural similarity of the placement while the older young people put less emphasis on that. Largely, the young people were satisfied with placements even with a sense of not feeling entirely at home. Confirming the two studies above, similar language was very important for the young people as a means of ease in communication.

So while cultural differences could lead to misunderstandings and conflicts (Luster et al, 2009), foster carers with the same cultural background didn't determine the success of a placement. Cross cultural placements with foster carers valuing diversity and young people's development (Raghalhaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015) were effective. Older young people didn't put a lot of emphasis on cultural similarity in foster placements (Rip et al, 2020) suggesting varying individual needs based on unique experiences. But all the studies confirm the value of cultural continuity through similar or different background of carers, speaking of native language as well as the relationships formed in the foster placements.

Social Workers can play a significant role in the care for unaccompanied children and according to Unison and Coram's joint report (2024), social workers being able to support young people effectively will make a huge difference in their welfare and future development. Considering what effective support can look like and reviewing some of the literature relevant to unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people's experiences, Kohli (2006) found emotional commitment at the heart of effective practice. The value of reciprocity came through in the research where young people wanted to experience authority figures positively and social workers found that in their relationship with the young people; honesty, being realistic and precise in sharing information with young people was of utmost importance (Kohli,2006). Aware of this as an underlying foundation, Kohli (2006) found social workers practicing within three domains. One domain was where the young people's practical needs were met on an everyday level. The second domain of practice involved connection and an understanding of the young people's emotional worlds and lastly, the domain where social workers and young people co-created their relationship, there was flexibility and a depth in their relationship with the social workers knowing and liking the young person. Thus conveying that each Social Workers chose the way they practice and the level of connection they develop with young people in order to care for them.

One of the many challenges of this practice with UASCs can be an unfavourable decision on their asylum claim. Discussions on voluntary returns and forced removal can be very difficult (Wright, 2014) but Kane (2006) highlights the importance of planning for all eventualities (as cited in Wright, 2014). According to Wright (2014), working with the understanding of all possible outcomes enables and empowers young people to make informed choices, with full understanding of the processes involved. Social Workers are also encouraged to use their positive relationships with young people to promote voluntary returns as opposed to forced removals (Wright, 2014). This sheds light on an unwanted outcome and one that can be deemed not a pressing relevant matter and how to best navigate this using social worker and young people relationships.

Larkin (2015) notes another challenge for policy and practice within the UK as a lack of research specifically on unaccompanied young women. Gender was considered to contribute further to the complexity of the asylum process and the gender of the social worker becoming significant in work with young women. According to Larkin (2015), young women's vulnerability was linked to their gender and age, both limiting their self-determination capacities. For the Social Workers in Larkin's study, viewing the young women holistically, I.e. considering their resilience and agency as well as their disadvantaged position, helped to avoid pathologizing the young women. Social Workers worked hard

towards becoming safe havens for the young women both physically and psychologically, at the same time resisting the ‘culture of disbelief’ (Pearce, 2011) and advocating for the young women. Larkin (2015) noted social workers struggling with feelings of powerlessness within the system and continuously negotiating their work with young women on the principle of best interests but this remained a tense struggle. Some further challenges in this work can be seen as lack of training and support (Robinson, 2014) which was also evidenced in Foster Care practice. Working so closely with asylum seeking and refugee clients, one will be potentially exposed to some difficult stories that are likely to bring up one’s own feelings and associations that are best addressed with training and support like supervision. Robinson (2014) found that there is difficulty maintaining professional boundaries with vulnerable people and they struggle with powerlessness and frustration in their roles, supplementing findings of Larkin (2015). As an NGO, it was noted that social workers were encouraged to spend more time on administrative duties which took away time and limited the capacity of them developing therapeutic relationship with clients (Robinson, 2014). This is important to note that the impact of this work itself and organisational structures and responsibilities can impede the quality of interactions and support provided to young people in these circumstances.

Working with young people of diverse backgrounds, cultural continuity was seen of significance in foster care placements. Radjack et al (2020) found that

promoting cultural representation and its expressiveness in young people, helped them develop a coherent narrative and foster identity construction process. This in turn, also helped social workers develop their cultural competence working with unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people. Cultural competence in professionals working with this population can facilitate developing safe and open spaces, allow learning and self-growth and further impact effective practice positively.

This section is a helpful literary framework highlighting the impact of professionals involved on UASC and young people's experiences which will be further informed through the data collected from secondary population in this thesis.

2.5 Trauma, Resilience and Adversity Activated Development

This section examines the research undertaken into mental health and wellbeing of unaccompanied children and young people's lives. More specifically, this section will outline trauma studies and therapeutic interventions, resilience studies and wellbeing, and lastly exploring adversity activated development in relation to UASCs and young people. The review will connect and explore its impact on the larger topic of agency.

2.5.1 Trauma Studies

The focus on refugees is often viewed through the lens of trauma. This section will review the prevalent research on trauma and the associated findings related to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in unaccompanied children and young people.

Unaccompanied children and young people are often considered and referred to as the most vulnerable group of refugees (Sourander, 1998; Sierau et al, 2018; Raddatz, 2019; Pfeiffer et al, 2022; SCEP, n.d.). This vulnerability has been linked to increased mental health issues and trauma symptoms. For instance, previous studies have shown that unaccompanied refugee minors experience greater psychiatric morbidity than accompanied children and the general population (Huemer et al, 2009; Norredam et al, 2018; Ehntholt et al, 2018). Similarly, unaccompanied youth were found to have been exposed to more traumatic events and report higher depressive symptoms than accompanied youth (Derluyn et al, 2009; Bean et al, 2007). They also exhibit higher rates of psychiatric and neurotic disorders compared to accompanied youth (Norredam et al, 2018), with another study also noting higher levels of introverted symptoms (Bean et al, 2007).

In their review of all existing literature from 1998 to 2008, Huemer et al. (2009) suggested the need for developing culturally sensitive measures, conducting

long term studies with the young people, and studying the full range of psychopathology as there had been a lot of emphasis on PTSD symptoms thus far.

One of the longitudinal studies conducted with unaccompanied minors aimed to study the impact of the asylum system on their mental health (Jakobsen et al, 2017). The research spanned 2.5 years with data being collected within 3 weeks of arrival, followed by follow-ups on 4 months, 15 months and 26 months of arrival. It was found that low support and refusal of asylum claims negatively impacted their mental health (Jakobsen et al, 2017). This approach is useful because it examines the trajectory of the young people over time, rather than focusing solely on their initial experiences upon arrival after a potential arduous journey. It provides insight into the mental health experiences as the asylum process continues, which is often fraught with uncertainty. Another noteworthy finding from this study (Jakobsen et al, 2017) was that while most of the participants demonstrated PTSD symptoms, there was no evidence of psychiatric care which the authors attributed to a lack of resources or reluctance to seek support. Both these explanations are plausible with additional factors such as not knowing whom to ask, stigma around mental health issues and a lack of awareness or normalisation of the refugee experience. While Jakobsen et al (2017) focused on the impact of the asylum system on mental health, another longitudinal study (Pfeiffer et al, 2022) explored the experiences of

unaccompanied children and young people still on the move. The authors found evidence of continued traumatization during their flight along with high daily stressors and post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) (Pfeiffer et al, 2022). The researchers noted stress symptoms following potentially traumatic events rather than only focusing on trauma and more psychiatric measures like PTSD. While Jakobson et al.'s study (2017) was based in Norway, Pfeiffer et al.'s (2022) study was based in 29 different countries. Another longitudinal study based in Germany (Müller et al., 2019) examined the mental health of unaccompanied youth after resettlement, with the first assessment at 22 months and a follow up a year later. It was noted that psychological distress had decreased in the overall sample at the follow up, with a positive decision on the asylum claim marking a difference. However, psychological distress was still noted to be high (Müller et al., 2019). The study highlighted the need for appropriate treatment for unaccompanied youth, which has also been confirmed by other studies in this section so far.

Wood et al. (2020) have stated that children seeking sanctuary may have experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) during their migration journey, with certain factors such as being unaccompanied increasing the risk of experiencing harm from ACEs. Additionally, another study has found that unaccompanied asylum seeking children have not only experienced war

related traumas but also multiple other life adversities (Jensen et al., 2015) further compounding their risk from ACEs.

Looking at some demographically focused studies, Mohwinkel et al. (2018) found that female gender was associated with higher vulnerability to mental health conditions among unaccompanied refugee minors, though they noted a lack of substantive studies in the area to evidence gender differences. While it was not the focus of their study, previous research has found that age and female gender predicted or influenced PTSD symptoms (Huemer et al., 2009) and girls were found to be particularly vulnerable to traumatic events and depressive symptoms (Derluyn et al., 2009). Regarding specific ethnicity, Bronstein et al. (2012) found in their research with male Afghan unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, that one third of the sample reporting high PTSD symptoms. A unique finding was that those living in semi-independent accommodation were more likely to report increased PTSD symptoms than those living in foster care, suggesting foster care as a supportive and protective factor. Another study specifically with Afghan UASCs noted that traumatic events pre-migration further negatively impact their wellbeing, with greater behavior problems related to their increased time spent in the host country (Bronstein et al., 2013). In research assessing suicide rates and factors for unaccompanied minors and youth, Mittendorfer-Rutz et al. (2020) highlighted gender and Afghan ethnicity. They found that the suicide rate for

unaccompanied minors and youth were 51.2 per 100,000, compared to 6.1 per 100,000 for Swedish youth, with 100% suicides being male and 83% Afghans (Mittendorfer-Rutz et al., 2020). The alarming statistic underscores the need for mental health support and raises fundamental questions about the asylum process and its impact on children and young people. The studies so far call for a focus on agency within the system, its effects on mental health, and the implementation of child and youth centered policies for empowerment and support.

Some recommendations noted include offering higher supported living arrangements to decrease psychological distress (Hodes et al, 2008), focusing on education and care along with individual motivations as factors positively impacting mental health and adjustment (Eide and Hjern,2013) and the need for applying resilience frameworks to further the understanding of positive outcomes (Bronstein et al, 2012).

2.5.2 Impact of Trauma and Displacement on Development of UASCs

The experiences that children endure during and as a consequence of war or aggression starkly contrast with their developmental needs and their right to grow up in a physically and emotionally safe and predictable environment (Bürgin et al., 2022). When trauma is experienced starting from middle

childhood (approximately seven years onward), children are better able to comprehend what has occurred due to their more advanced cognitive abilities. As a result, traumatized children in this age group may exhibit concentration difficulties, declining academic performance, interpersonal struggles, heightened self-consciousness, increased fearfulness, and greater dependency (Kaminer & Eagle, 2010). Kaminer and Eagle (2010) further explain that as children grow older, the physical, mental, and social changes associated with adolescence and puberty amplify the effects of trauma. The impact of trauma during this stage of life may manifest in various ways, including withdrawal or emotional "shutting down," aggression or defiance, self-destructive behaviours such as substance abuse, and risky or reckless actions. Additionally, children may exhibit regressive behaviours (e.g., thumb sucking or bed-wetting), heightened separation or stranger anxiety, re-enactment of trauma in play, mood swings or excessive crying, nightmares, and sleep disturbances (Smith et al., 2005). Kaminer and Eagle (2010) emphasize the importance of recognizing the resources available to children at all developmental stages, such as their capacity for imagination, and channelling these strengths to support children and adolescents after traumatic experiences. The authors also highlight the critical role of the environment in which trauma occurs, noting that how trauma manifests is influenced by both the context of the experience and the individual developmental attributes of the child.

In 2021, 78% of unaccompanied minors who claimed asylum in the UK were aged 16 years and above, 28% were aged 14 to 15 years, and 3% were under the age of 14 (Refugee Council, 2022). Generally considered the period of adolescence, this time is characterized by resolving the developmental task of identity versus identity confusion, which involves the consolidation of a personal identity (Erikson, 1968).

Ressler et al. (1988), in their extensive research on unaccompanied children, outlined the developmental impact of wars and disasters. The authors highlight that a significant challenge for adolescents during this period is the difficulty in integrating past experiences into a coherent sense of self. Excessive identity diffusion can result in withdrawn or apathetic behaviour, as well as difficulty making decisions, commitments, and career choices.

Additionally, Ressler et al. (1988) note an increase in separation anxiety among children of all ages during wars and conflicts, with children making concerted efforts to remain close to their parents and demonstrating an increased need for parental contact. The authors cite a comparative study between evacuated and non-evacuated children, which provided convincing evidence that the purposeful separation of children from their parents was more traumatic than the direct exposure to bombings or the witnessing of destruction, injury, and death from air raids. Similarly, an English study on children under the age of five revealed more severe and long-lasting disturbances among evacuated children compared to those who were not evacuated (Langmeier and Matějček,

1975, as cited in Ressler et al. 1988) These findings indicate the critical importance of the sense of safety that children of all ages derive from being with their parents during adverse and frightening times.

According to Ressler et al. (1988), unaccompanied children's previous family experiences play a significant role in their ability to endure the stress of separation, loss, and other kinds of adversity. These children often exhibit distress and behavioural problems, which are closely linked to their age and corresponding developmental stages. However, the authors note that if separation is quickly followed by adequate alternative care, opportunities to form attachments with other adults, and the continuation of age-appropriate educational and social activities, their distress and psychological pain do not necessarily develop into long-term psychological disorders.

The continuation of familial, cultural, and linguistic ties also plays a crucial role in mitigating the negative impacts of separation (Ressler et al. 1988). This underscores the significant role that services and key figures play in providing suitable placements and care to support unaccompanied children.

2.5.3 Psychotherapy and Therapeutic Interventions with Unaccompanied Children and Young People

Further on from trauma studies which noted high mental health issues, PTSD symptoms and lack of appropriate care for the population, this section will review the critical literature of interventions and therapy offered to unaccompanied children and young people.

Considering therapeutic treatment, Katsounari's (2014) case of an unaccompanied minor is examined through an integrated therapy approach, combining relational psychodynamic work with a trauma focused intervention. Psychodynamic therapy focuses and explores the client's unconscious processes as they manifest in their behaviors, and a relational psychodynamic therapy approach emphasizes the relationship with the therapist as crucial and often considered the most important factor in treatment (Curtis, 2020). This approach is particularly relevant to this case, given the disruption and trauma associated with a primary caregiver. This case is of a 16 year old Latino child, who was referred for therapy due to severe PTSD resulting from physical and emotional abuse by his father. It is important to note this was the reason for fleeing his home and seeking asylum in the US. This case highlights that adverse childhood experiences rather than the commonly assumed causes of war or migration trauma can drive unaccompanied children to seek safety. The boy exhibited distressed symptoms when discussing the abuse as well as when talking about his father. His experiences also led him to have difficult or conflictual relationships with male authority figures. The therapist noted that young boy

experienced a decrease in symptoms such as nightmares and flashbacks, throughout the course of treatment. There was significant change in his emotional expressiveness, interpersonal contact, ability to ask for support and an increased sense of agency (Katsounari, 2014). The young boy was also able to form relationships with male staff at the center he was residing, demonstrating the therapeutic progress made through the relationship with the therapist. The successful therapeutic treatment and relationship led to an increased sense of agency for the young boy, suggesting psychotherapy and mental health support can have a direct impact on the experience of agency. This intervention can be highly effective, as evidence suggests that patients who receive psychodynamic therapy maintain therapeutic gains and continue to improve after treatment ends (Shedler, 2010; Dresden, 2020).

A different therapeutic approach is explored by Unterhitzberger et al., (2015) who conducted a study on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as an intervention for treating PTSS, noting a lack of studies on treatment for unaccompanied minors. In CBT, psychological problems are believed to arise from distorted thinking and the treatment focuses on correcting these distorted thought patterns (Waltman & Sokol, 2017). High levels of PTSS were reported by the therapists at the start of treatment, and a significant decrease in these symptoms after the trauma focused CBT, with the authors (2015) suggesting this to be an applicable and effective treatment method for this group. Here, the

treatment focused on how certain ways of thinking consequently affect emotions and behavior, which significantly alleviated distressing symptoms significantly in unaccompanied minors. This is a problem-oriented approach (IQWiG, 2006) which can prove useful for unaccompanied minors by helping them to focus on tasks and on the present. However, it does not allow for deeper exploration or the in depth working through of emotional issues as seen in the psychodynamic approach noted by Katsounari (2014).

Besides the longer-established therapeutic models, Meyer Demott et al., (2017) aimed to study the impact of an expressive arts intervention on traumatic symptoms in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children through a first time conducted controlled study. 145 unaccompanied boys from the age of 15 to 18 participated, and they were allocated to two different groups; the expressive arts intervention group or a 'life as usual' control group. Assessments took place at the onset and throughout the 25-month intervention. It was found that the expressive arts group, at the end of the intervention reported higher life satisfaction, better support with trauma symptoms and a greater sense of hope for the future (Meyer Demott et al., 2017). This provided evidence for the benefits and strengths of an arts based and creative approach as a form of mental health support for unaccompanied minors and young people. Adding further evidence and support of creative ventures, Whyte (2017) conducted an interesting arts project at a museum for asylum seeking minors and argued for

the importance of diverse and social spaces like these for youth to engage in. Based on the concept of a contact zone (Askins & Pain, 2011), Whyte (2017) found that the space offered enriching experiences to the minors through making art. Whyte (2017) stated the project was a space for potential transformation, as the asylum-seeking minors engaged in art but also connected with each other. Both studies (Meyer Demott et al., 2017; Whyte, 2017) provided insight into an intervention that was therapeutic not only through the medium of art and creativity, but also through the social connection and the group itself.

Building further on the significance of groups and connections, a unique and insightful therapeutic endeavor is demonstrated through the concept of a ‘Transitional Non-Residential Therapeutic Community’ (Melzak, 2017). The organization run by Melzak sustains a therapeutic community where unaccompanied young asylum-seeking youth receive holistic support, which includes access to psychotherapy, therapeutic activities and practical asylum-based support in one place. This approach is based on the linked connection between internal and external worlds of the young people, noting that only clinic-based interventions will not be adequate (Melzak, 2017). The therapeutic community offers individual and group psychotherapy to address deeper emotional issues, as well as their experiences of violence, separation, losses. Moreover, there are therapeutic activities including cooking, music, and play

allowing social and communal connections through creativity. Additionally, case work and social work which remain crucial for the young people involved. The significance of the social and political context remains rooted in this work (Melzak, 2017) as true support and understanding for the young people and their experiences while they seek asylum would not be possible. This residential therapeutic community (Melzak, 2017) focus on building resilience through attachment and belonging, links with community, reflection, creativity and imagination and importantly, in the context of this research thesis, the development of agency and capacity to solve problems. Access to a therapeutic community, with all necessary support offered to unaccompanied young people underpins their focus on development of agency as one of their outcomes.

Refugees have a set of unique experiences and contexts that require a different approach to therapeutic work. This has led clinicians to adopt group and community approaches to their work with refugees, as seen by Melzak (2017) but also the Refugee team clinicians at the Tavistock Centre in London (Amias et al., 2014). One such community-based intervention is the *Tree of Life*, which can serve as an alternative to traditional western mental health approaches and provide access to therapeutic support in a non-stigmatizing way (Hughes, 2014; Amias et al., 2014). The Tree of Life intervention uses the tree as a creative metaphor and is a strength based narrative methodology that enables individuals to tell their stories, rooted in their own culture and histories. Additionally, it is a

visual technique that uses art and diagrams, rather than being based solely on language and literacy, and is very useful in its application in asylum seeking and refugee communities (Hughes, 2014). It has been noted that Tree of Life groups have been well attended, providing a safe space for shared struggles, finding solutions and allowing individuals to develop empowering stories about their own lives (Hughes, 2014; Amias et al., 2014).

Other creative therapeutic interventions noted with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people include short term dramatherapy, which contributed to the enhancement of the young person's resilience, including their inner strength and sense of agency as a coping strategy (Nemeckova, 2020) ; and the Sandplay method, which required the young people to construct three dimensional scenarios in a sand tray, serving as an unconscious representation of their emotions and experiences (Dobretsova & Wiese, 2019). The Sandplay method revealed several signs of trauma through the themes and representations in the sand, with the researchers recommending it as a non-verbal psychological assessment tool, as well as suggesting further development and use with unaccompanied asylum seekers (Dobretsova & Wiese, 2019).

While different studies have listed different kind of therapeutic interventions, all of them have indicated their significance and contribution in providing mental health support. In a review of wide range of psychotherapeutic interventions

with unaccompanied minors, Demazure et al (2017) could not conclude that any one particular intervention was superior to the others in alleviating distress and trauma symptoms. However, all 17 interventions reviewed noted a reduction in different symptomologies and marked improvements in mental health and wellbeing. Due to small sample sizes and different methodological designs, the studies could not be deemed generalizable, but the researchers noted common integral themes in these interventions: creating a safe space and building a therapeutic alliance, rebuilding identity, developing coping strategies, resilience and the ability to process emotions, improving self-esteem and fostering social connections (Demazure et al.,2017). The importance of the therapeutic relationship and the therapist's capacity to bear witness to the young person's trauma has been noted to be crucial in facilitating the mourning process and the consequent therapeutic benefits as an intervention itself (Cohen & Yadlin, 2018). Challenges in establishing and maintaining the therapeutic alliance, such as the practitioner's gender and ethnicity, or the lack of clarity around talking therapy as an intervention, have also been noted (Majumder et al.,2019).

Furthermore, given the nature of this clinical work, therapists are recommended to maintain appropriate boundaries with unaccompanied minors and young people, especially when dealing with human right violations and history of atrocities. Therapists should also be aware of transference reactions and the risk of vicarious trauma in their therapeutic work (Katsounari, 2014).

One of the most important takeaways is the understanding of the needs of the unaccompanied minors and young people as a population, where clinicians have found being versatile, creative and flexible to be helpful characteristics in gaining the credibility of the community (Amias et al., 2014). It is also crucial to modify narrative approaches that are classically used in western countries to address symptomology (Demazure et al., 2017).

Considering ethical practice and challenges with unaccompanied minors and young people, organizations and trainings bodies are encouraged to develop professional guidelines for this work, including continued skill development in the area of culturally competent therapy, bilingual therapy and therapy with interpreters, strength-based approaches and clinician engagement in ongoing training and supervision (Dash, 2020).

Mental health support and psychotherapeutic interventions in the studies, some explicitly and some implicitly, have noted improvements and impacts on experience and sense of agency for the young people, indicating the value of addressing psychological distress in their time while seeking asylum.

2.5.4 Resilience and Wellbeing

This section examines literature that recognizes and focuses on UASC and young people's resilience despite the innumerable challenges they face in their

journey to seek asylum. Resilience can be understood as a process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult life experiences through flexibility and adjustment to internal and external demands (APA, n.d.). In connection to resilience, studies also explore wellbeing of UASCs and young people, which encompasses a quality of life for individuals with a sense of meaning and purpose (WHO, 2021) and a sense of overall health and satisfaction.

A vast body of literature focuses on pathology of unaccompanied children and Kohli and Mather (2003) argued that their capacity to respond robustly to the stressors around them has been under reported and they demonstrate resilience in conducting their everyday lives. Authors emphasize that becoming a refugee is indeed a purposeful act of strength and capability (Muecke, 1992; Ahern, 2000, as cited in Kohli and Mather, 2003). The authors state the significance of promoting the psychosocial wellbeing of UASCs towards their self-recovery through promoting their talents and interests, supporting them in their commitment towards education and learning, as well as their connection to others; which would allow the young people to experience a sense of agency (Kohli and Mather, 2003). A recent review noted that psychosocial interventions aim at UASC and young people's empowerment, wellbeing, support and integration but remain under studied, and more focus and illustration of this would prove useful (Moutsou et al., 2023).

Exploring resilience in young refugees, Sleijpen (2017) highlighted that autonomy, academic performance, peer and family support, and participation in the host society contributed to their resilience. However, these strategies were dynamic, fluctuating based on the young people's current circumstances. Prolonged uncertainty regarding asylum claims and older age were identified as factors that diminished resilience over time. Similarly, Maegusuku-Hewett et al. (2007) found that individual traits, such as optimism, patience, and confidence, interacted with cultural identity to shape resilience. Their study emphasized the role of cultural identity as a protective factor, with strategies like resistance and assimilation bolstering resilience. Groark et al. (2010) further argued that a 'secure base' is essential for promoting resilience and coping abilities in young people; however, this is often unpredictable due to systemic challenges. Groark et al. (2010) draws on Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory, where the term 'secure base' refers to the stability, security, and comfort experienced with a primary caregiver in early life, which fosters exploration of the world and is often sought as a condition for successful psychotherapy and therapeutic endeavours. Both studies underline the complex interplay between individual agency, social relationships, and the broader sociocultural context, emphasizing the importance of recognizing children's agency within these systems. However, while these studies offer valuable insights, they leave room for further exploration into how structural and systemic barriers may undermine these coping strategies, particularly in long-term asylum contexts.

Promoting the well-being of separated refugee children requires a holistic approach that addresses both emotional and practical needs. Deveci (2012) advocates for a relationship-based framework, where practitioners play a critical role in providing not only emotional support but also practical assistance, such as helping young people navigate the asylum system. This practical help is essential for restoring a sense of agency, which can reduce anxiety and enable positive engagement with other aspects of their lives. In parallel, Chase (2013) emphasizes the importance of ontological security—a sense of stability, a positive self-concept and the ability to visualize a future role in society are fundamental to well-being, offering an alternative to the pervasive feeling of living in limbo. This projected sense of security is often neglected in well-being discussions, which tend to focus more on immediate needs. Both perspectives underline that fostering a sense of agency, belonging, and security—both in the present and into the future—should be central to interventions aimed at enhancing the resilience and well-being of young refugees.

Portnoy and Ward (2020) advocate for a stepwise approach to delivering services to unaccompanied children and young people, emphasizing the need to avoid overwhelming them. They highlight the importance of recognizing the non-linear nature of health needs and being attentive to emerging psychological difficulties. Furthermore, they stress the necessity of involving unaccompanied

asylum-seeking children (UASCs) and young people in future service development. In the context of well-being and resilience, Sleijpen et al. (2013) caution against the social stigma associated with the label of "refugee." This label often perpetuates a perception of young refugees as vulnerable and at risk, leading to a portrayal of them as passive victims lacking agency. Instead, they argue for recognizing these individuals as survivors, equipped with the abilities to bounce back and demonstrate significant resilience. This perspective not only challenges prevailing stereotypes but also underscores the importance of fostering an understanding of their strengths and capacities in policy and practice.

2.5.5 Adversity Activated Development

While trauma and resilience are words often used in the everyday, adversity activated development (AAD) was a more novel concept and something I have learnt about only through studying the 'Refugee Care' program. AAD (Papadopoulos, 2004,2006) refers to the positive developments as a result of being exposed to adversity, and offers a more unique and holistic understanding of the refugee experience. Papadopoulos (2007) argues against using the term 'refugee trauma' as it presupposes that everyone exposed to adversity will become psychologically traumatized which undermines the very unique and individual nature of responding to events. Understandably, exposure to

devastating events would create distress and disruption, however the lens of viewing refugees as only traumatized can have negative consequences like learned helplessness and takes away from the new perspective and reevaluations that can occur for people in these circumstances (Papadopoulos, 2007). The author therefore suggests considering a whole range of responses to adversity, which includes negative effects, neutral effects as well as positive effects (Papadopoulos, 2007).

Table 1 - The Adversity Grid

		Negative Effects		Neutral Effects	Positive Effects
Individual	Psychiatric disorder, PTSD	Distressful psychological reaction	Ordinary human suffering	Resilience	Adversity-Activated Development (AAD)
Family					
Community					
Society/culture					

Table from Refugees, Trauma and Adversity-Activated Development, Papadopoulos (2007, p. 309)

The table provides a visual representation of the spectrum of responses to adversity as suggested by Papadopoulos (2007) and at the various levels it operates. Two relevant reasons to consider AAD in this thesis: It provides a view beyond trauma and resilience studies, and urges us to explore AAD when looking at the experience of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people. There are no published papers on AAD and UASCs, which prompts

further research and consideration in this direction. Another important reason is to consider the connection between AAD and agency. Having experienced adversity, are the young people able to acknowledge positive developments, and if so, how does this impact their experience of choices, ability to make decisions and act, and therefore the experience of agency.

Section 2 - AGENCY

2.6 INTRODUCTION

Agency is a term I only recall encountering as an adult in academic circles; however, the sense of agency and its impact have been significant to me throughout my life. The etymology of the term originates from the Latin word, *agentia* meaning ‘to do’ or ‘to act’ and the word has developed over time in association to the word *agent*, a person who acts, the ability or capacity to act, or someone who acts to produce a particular result (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d). Agency is a lived experience that can be seen in everyday life, and relates to how we choose to live our lives, and the responsibilities we hold for the decisions we make (Frei, 2008). It is a condition or state of exerting power (Merriam-webster dictionary, n.d.) and implies a sense of control or power we can or cannot exert in situations. Keeping this in mind, a sense of agency can be

crucial for individuals as one navigates through life, and a notion and quality that one continuously seeks.

Working within the charity sector, and studying about the context of refugees and asylum seekers, raised a legitimate query – do these individuals have agency? This curiosity revealed that this is an under researched area and this evolved into the research project of exploring the experience of agency of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people in the UK. Within this research project, agency is defined as the capacity to act, make choices and influence one's life.

This section examines the literature on agency from various perspectives, to inform a deeper exploration of the processes underlying human experience, including the capacity to act and navigate ones environment.

‘It is such a multidimensional concept, I believe that agency can only truly be appreciated and understood from a multidisciplinary perspective’ (Frei, 2008, p. vii). The section therefore includes psychological perspectives, sociological perspectives, and insights from other perspectives like philosophy and anthropology. Additionally, a section on examining agency in the context of childhood and young people seemed significant.

2.7 Psychological Perspectives on Agency

A sense of agency is a feeling of being in the driver's seat when it comes to one's actions, when a person can feel in charge rather than things just happening to them (Moore, 2016). The suggestion here is that a sense of agency can be experienced when one feels they have control over their actions, when they can 'steer' and 'maneuver' things. Moore (2016) notes in his study on agency, that a sense of agency is difficult to measure and can generally be grouped under implicit and explicit measures to capture this experience. An implicit measure tries to understand the correlation between an action and the agentic experience whereas an explicit measure asks the participant to report on the agentic experience directly. This research project has included both implicit and explicit measures to understand the experience of agency of UASCs and young people.

Two influential theories of sense of agency according to Moore (2016) have been 'Comparator Model' developed by Frith et al. (2000) and Frith (2005), the 'Theory of apparent mental causation' developed by Wegner and Wheatley (1999) and Wegner (2002). According to the Comparator Model, a sense of agency can be explained through comparing a predicted and actual outcome of an action and this is rooted in neuroscience. So for instance, if there is a predicted outcome for an intended action, and the brain judges the prediction and the outcome to align, like wanting to kick a football and then kicking the

football, this can cause a sense of agency, marking the importance of the motor and sensory feedback within the body. On the other hand, the Theory of Apparent mental causation suggests agency is created by the mind through a relationship between thoughts and actions, implying more of a psychological foundation to the understanding of agency rather than a neural/physiological one. Both offer different ways of understanding how one can experience a sense of agency with the comparator model used to study mental health disorders like schizophrenia (Moore, 2016), and the theory of mental causation being applied in processes like hypnosis (Knafo & Weinberger, 2024).

A psychological framework of examining agency emerges in Milgram's agency theory (1973), which originated from his experiment on obedience conducted in 1961. While I will not elaborate on the experiment itself, to provide context: Milgram studied the extent to which ordinary people would follow orders from an authority figure, even if it meant harming another person. The study concluded that 65% of participants were willing to administer the highest level of punishment (even fatal) to another person when instructed by the researcher, who acted as the authority figure (McLeod, 2008). The experiment aimed to understand the behaviour of war criminals and their justifications for atrocities during World War II. This led to the development of Milgram's agency theory (1973), which identified two behavioural states in social situations: the autonomous state, where individuals direct their own actions and take full

responsibility for them, and the agentic state, where individuals act as agents for another person, following instructions while assuming the authority figure bears responsibility for the consequences (McLeod, 2008).

Agency theory also introduces the concept of moral strain, which occurs when individuals experience discomfort due to a conflict between their conscience and the authority figure's demands. According to Okafor et al. (2019), the shift into an agentic state of mind relieves one of this moral strain as “the individual displaces the responsibility of the situation onto the authority figure, thereby absolving him/herself of the consequence of his/her actions” (p. 259). This suggests individuals may adopt passive positions under significant pressure, adhering to obedience and following orders. This gives foundational evidence of how atrocities like genocides can take place in the world (Staub, 2014). It can be useful for reflecting on whether and how agency is experienced by UASCs and young people as they interact with power structures such as the asylum system. It prompts consideration of what their choices look like, how these choices are enacted under pressure, and how they navigate interactions with authority figures.

One limitation of agency theory is its lack of focus on disobedience—specifically, why some individuals choose to resist orders from authority or challenge systems. An interesting study by Jackson (2006) in the field of medicine argues that ordinary people can act against systemic constraints, and over time, such actions can lead to structural changes. This research highlights

the dynamics between doctors and patients, framing the relationship as one between an individual and an expert or authority figure. Jackson (2006) notes that doctors can adopt the role of educators, encouraging patients to actively participate in their healing and make informed, healthy choices, rather than treating patients as objects or passive recipients of care. This perspective critiques blind compliance and emphasizes collaborative engagement.

The significance of collaboration and reciprocity can be seen in Bandura's (2006) theory of *human agency* which states that people are self-organizing, self-regulating and self-reflecting and not passive observers of their behaviour; they have influence over their life circumstances rejecting the dualism of agency and structure. Detailed facets of human agency include four core properties; intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness, along with three modes of agency; individual, proxy and collective modes (Bandura, 2006). According to the author, there is no absolute agency and everyday agency requires a blend of the three modes of agency, where people bring in their own personal influence (individual), they influence others who have resources to act on their behalf (proxy) or pooling knowledge, skills and resources for desired outcomes (collective). These modes coming together can be useful when considering the functioning of UASCs and young people in their daily lives within the UK system.

In this context, the author is emphasizing that the self is socially constructed, recognizing that one can make things happen, and regard themselves as *agents*. Bandura (2006) suggested *personal efficacy* is the foundation of human agency, and that only by believing that one can produce desired effects by their actions, will people have incentive to act or persevere in the face of adversity.

Additionally, that self-efficacy is a resource in personal development and change, affects ones goals and aspirations, their level of motivation and perseverance, outlook on opportunities and impediments and expectations of outcomes.

Hagman (2020) and Sugarman (2018) talk about the importance of *self-agency*, as well as its significance to analysis and clinical work. Hagman (2020) argues that the capacity for personal agency is at the heart of self-experience, calling this self-agency, with the agentic self, emerging in social interactions. Here, the agent would have continuity in their thoughts, feeling and action, and being aware as well as having confidence in successfully adapting to their surrounding reality. Hagman (2020) suggests that a patient's ability to act and confidence in their self-agency should be included as part of the assessment criteria during treatment. Additionally, the success of treatment depends on patients acknowledging how they have come to be who they are, recognizing their strategies for optimal adaptation, and personally benefiting from reflecting on their capacities and capabilities. Similarly, Sugarman (2018) advocates for

promoting self-agency as a goal for analytic treatment, increasing awareness and self-reflection of their inner workings, and to be able to see their thoughts as mental constructions that have meaning and impact. Both researches advocate for “fostering recognition and elaboration of a sense of agency and capacity for creative living” (Hagman, 2020, p.39). Gorling and Bekes (2021) presents another research that emphasizes that increasing agency is a fundamental aim of psychotherapy, and therapists can increase client’s agency by increasing their awareness, therefore calling for a framework of *agency via awareness*. An increased sense of agency in successful therapeutic work with UASCs has been noted in research papers in section 2.5.3.

Building on the value of agency in therapeutic work, Wyatt (2023) looks at agency in trauma recovery and frames agency as the ‘power within’ and that it often relates to decision making power or control. With respect to trauma survivors, agency can be about choice and control regarding the process or story of the survivor, and the system and survivor agenda must align otherwise can lead to re-traumatization. Wyatt (2023) also highlights that agency for survivors would look different based on their culture and ethnicity and Eurocentric understanding of agency in these situations should not be imposed. The author advocates that, “Understanding, investigating and supporting the real interests, norms, values, positioning and motivations for a survivor’s choice is paramount- from their personal choice to their public choices” (Wyatt, 2023, p.

25). Situating agency as unique and contextual, offers a real insight into understanding and facilitating agency for survivors. Similarly, Mannell et al. (2014) conducted research into exploring agency of women in intimate partner violence, questioning the regular and normative conceptualisation of agency in these scenarios, which was either reporting the violence or leaving the relationship. The authors argued this does not account for various constraints that shape women's responses to intimate partner violence. The research found that reporting violence, resisting or fighting back, seeking emotional support and remaining silent were all possible and important responses in the situation, and that it is essential to consider women's own understanding of their actions and contexts when planning for helpful strategies (Mannell et al., 2014). Assuming what agency looks like for another person can easily undermine their experiences and contribute to an unhelpful, or even harmful, environment—highlighting the importance of this thesis's research project.

For Weisel-Barth (2009), an absence of a sense of personal agency in therapeutic work seems ‘absurd’ (p. 288). For the author, a coherent self is integral to even initiate choice and change, but considers ‘the self’ as something that is vanishing in today's time, and that is dissolving in the contexts it seems embedded in. The author questions free will and choice in psychoanalysis, without coming to any conclusions, but opening up the dilemma. Caston (2011) on the other hand states personal agency as an assumption in psychoanalysis

and suggests a framework to assess agency in therapeutic work with individuals, i.e., to observe the following; reversibility, whether the individual is able to change their actions, if necessary, self-observation and appropriateness, whether actions are suitable within a specified context. The author wanted to create more understanding of measuring agency as it was deemed difficult to measure it just as noted by Moore (2016) earlier in this section. Another psychoanalytic dimension is added by Hollway and Jefferson (2005) who wanted to highlight the impact of unconscious conflict in choice and agency. The authors sought to develop a psychosocial account of agency that would offer a more nuanced conceptualisation and provide a critique of the agency versus structure debate. They suggest that a single experience may hold multiple, and even conflicting, meanings for an individual, depending on how they position themselves as an agent and how they are shaped by broader social discourses and internal psychic defences. I believe this point holds immense value highlighting the complexity of people's experiences.

It's important to note that while research has found agency to be such an integral part of therapeutic work, it is not a concept that is addressed either at all or in depth in many clinical trainings. Glassgold (2007) argues that mental health is not merely an individualistic concern, but reflects larger systemic issues that must be understood within a framework rooted in social justice. Concepts like agency, freedom, power and resistance need to be incorporated under a more

socially aware approach to psychotherapy. The author advocates for psychotherapy to become a liberatory practice by “creating therapeutic tools to help increase personal and social agency with the goal being to become activists in their own lives and perhaps in the lives of others” (Goldman, 2007. P. 39).

This holds deep significance in refugee work, as it involves navigating structural challenges, confronting oppressive practices, and advocating for necessary and meaningful changes to support refugee communities as a whole.

As noted in almost all literature so far, that there is a social context and that humans don't exist in isolation, agency must be looked at contextually. Frie (2008) insists that agency be seen as a situated psychological phenomenon, which is not a fixed entity, but an active process of meaning construction, and that agency can never be divorced from the contexts in which it exists, nor reduced to these contexts either. “Agency is not an isolated act of detached self-reflection and choice. The objective, rather, is to reconfigure agency as an emergent and developmental process that is fundamentally intersubjective and contextualized.” (Frie, 2008, p.2). The author argues that agency is an embodied and active experience, bridging thinking and action, but also incorporates the significance of emotions. Therefore, the author is framing agency as dynamic, contextual and intersubjective. The relevance of this literature and the research findings have been addressed in the discussion section.

2.8 Sociological Perspectives on Agency

A sociological perspective examines social life, social change, and the social consequences of human behaviour, focusing on how groups, institutions, and societies interact within these contexts (American Sociological Association, 2024). From this viewpoint, all human behaviour is inherently social. This section reviews literature that explores agency through this lens.

Agency and structure are considered central concepts in sociology, with contemporary thought focusing less on agency versus structure and more on how these two influence each other (Stones, 2015). The complexity of their relationship is evident in Hays's (1994) explanation, which states: "A sociological understanding of agency recognizes embracing social choices that occur within structurally defined limits among structurally provided alternatives" (p. 65). Hays further explains that social life is fundamentally structured, and the choices made by agents tend to reproduce these structures. However, these choices can also have a varying transformative impact on the nature of the structures themselves. Therefore, Hays argues that human agency and structure share both an antagonistic and mutually dependent relationship (Hays, 1994).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that understanding the *temporal* nature of human experience is crucial to understanding agency, particularly how it interacts and exists in relation to structure. According to the authors, an individual or agent always exists simultaneously in the past, present, and future. In certain situations, they may be more oriented toward the past, future, or present, which shapes their actions and determines their responses to structures and contexts. Furthermore, when confronted with challenging or contradictory situations, human agency possesses transformative potential. The emphasis, therefore, remains on the contextual and dynamic nature of agency. Dépelteau (2008) on the other hand, argues in favour of a relational framework of sociology, where structures are not treated as fixed entities but as emerging from dynamic relationships. They state that this approach captures how individual actions evolve within broader networks of interaction. In essence, both researchers are making a similar point that human experience and social realities are shaped by ongoing processes and interactions rather than static entities.

Burkitt (2016) builds on Dépelteau's (2008) argument for relational sociology by emphasizing the significance of 'interdependence' (Elias, 1978, as cited in Burkitt, 2016). They argue that agents should be reconceptualized as interactants or interdependents and that agency arises only within relational contexts. The author advocates moving away from an individualistic notion of

agency, suggesting the impact on agency, actions and the constraints on individuals are shaped not by their relationship to structure alone but by the nature of their interdependence with others. In a way Burkitt (2018) brings together the ideas of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and Dépelteau (2008) by suggesting that '*agency of interactants is always located within temporal-relational contexts*' (Burkitt, 2018, p.17). In contrast, Jokinen (2016) highlights the concept of "precarious everyday agency," where the sense of the present is intensified. The author suggests that past events—whether from yesterday or last year—may hold little relevance to the present moment. Jokinen focuses on everyday habits, the challenges of breaking patterns, and the potential to reorganize from disorder. This process, the author argues, can create opportunities and provide resources for accessing new forms of precarious agency. While I agree that there can be potential from new found resources and creatively looking at 'everyday events', I disagree with the notion of the past being irrelevant or holding little value.

In considering contexts, sociological thought offers insights into the relationship between culture and agency. Hays (1994) emphasizes that culture should be understood as a social structure rather than a contrast to it, as it is both constraining and enabling, with its own underlying rationale. Culture, according to Hays, is a social, durable, and layered pattern of cognitive and normative systems; it is both objective and subjective, and "it is a resilient pattern that

provides for the continuity of life" (Hays, 1994, p. 70). Similarly, Ratner (2000) argues that agency is an active element of culture—dependent on cultural processes, shaping culture, and taking a cultural form. Agency is rooted in society and evolves over time, reflecting the dynamic interaction between individuals and their cultural environments.

Gangas (2016) examines influential sociological thinkers such as Giddens, Parsons, Sen, and Nussbaum and argues that the "capability approach" provides a stronger foundation for understanding agency by positioning capability as the cornerstone of agency. This approach emphasizes individuals' actions aligned with their values and the expansion of agency through the development of capabilities, even within structural constraints.

Campbell (2009), on the other hand, distinguishes between two forms of agency: the *power of agency*, which refers to an actor's ability to initiate and sustain a course of action, and *agentic power*, which refers to an actor's ability to act independently of the constraining forces of social structures. Campbell suggests that these two forms of agency do not necessarily overlap, as it is possible to possess one without the other. The author stresses the importance of distinguishing these forms to develop a more nuanced understanding of human agency. While these aspects of agency are often viewed as integral and encompassing of the broader concept of agency, differentiating and isolating

them in practical, real-world contexts can be challenging as they often interrelate and overlap.

Research by Thoits (2006) examines the relationship between personal agency and stress, emphasizing the importance of studying this in greater detail. The author suggests that individuals with better mental health are more likely to exercise agency through purposeful problem-solving efforts and their ability to address or adapt to unavoidable stressors. Thoits further highlights the need to explore how people navigate in and out of stressful situations, cope with structural constraints, and construct meaningful lives. This understanding, the author argues, can also provide valuable insights into the minority of individuals who struggle to endure adverse and stressful conditions.

A useful application of exploring agency in this way can be seen in Visanich's (2018) research, which provides a nuanced perspective by examining the complexity of agency in young women's lives through their interactions with the church, restrictive legislation, and the educational system. Visanich argues that structure and agency must be bridged to understand women's life domains, highlighting how young women employ various strategies and acts of resistance to navigate social and cultural constraints while pursuing their careers. At the same time, they experience anxiety and uncertainty as they juggle multiple roles. The research underscores the intricate negotiation between modernity and

tradition, revealing that while agency can bring liberation, it may also entail ambivalence in certain contexts.

Sociological insights into structures and agency informs and enriches our understanding of experiences of unaccompanied children within the context of the asylum system.

2.9 Agency, Children and Young people

This section examines the literature on children and young people's agency specifically. The intention is to explore how this literature might inform our understanding of UASC and young people's agency within this research project.

It is interesting to note the evolving nature of the concepts of 'child' and 'childhood' historically and its consequent relation to child abuse, child rights and agency. Different child rearing practices through time have determined the attitude towards the child for instance children have been raised in wide range of ways from nurturing to indifferent to savage (Chaffin, 2006, as cited in Haring et al., 2019). Child abuse (covering various forms like physical, psychological, sexual and neglect) was one aspect where child agency can be seen to be thwarted and at some point needed to be acknowledged and defined (Haring et al., 2019). The development of women's rights heralded the rights

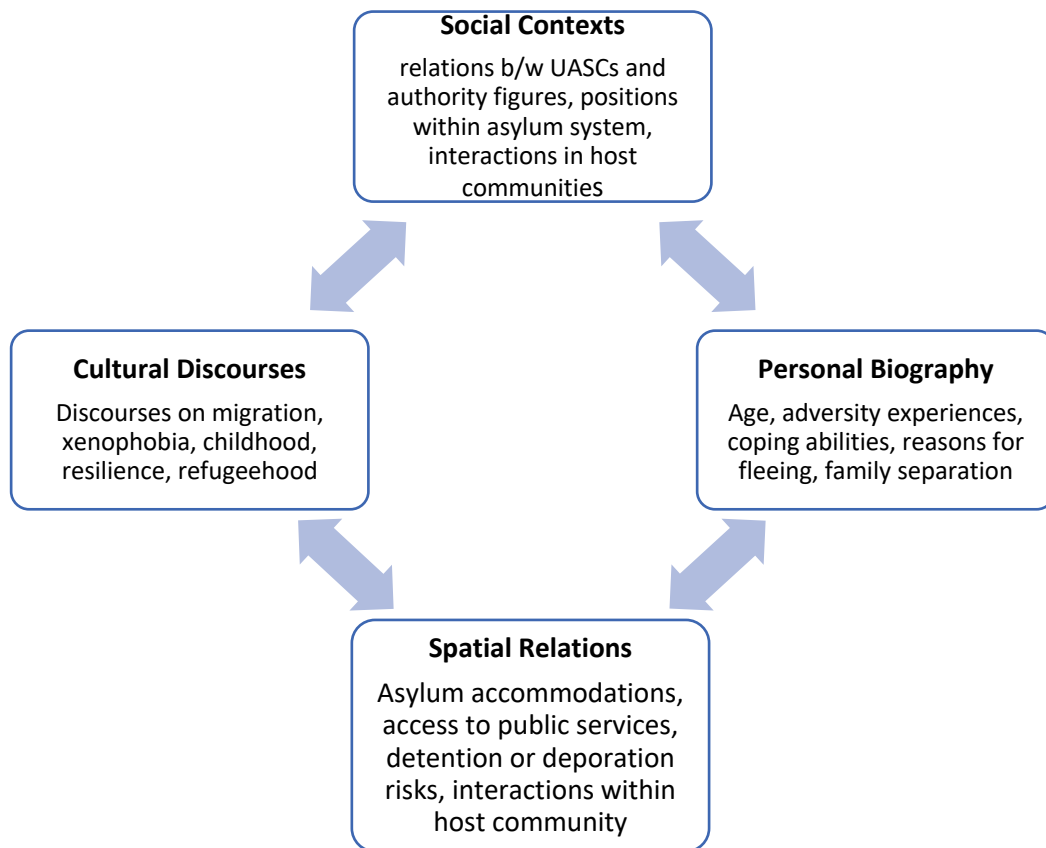
and attention to the child (ibid.). Sorin and Galloway (2006) developed different typologies of children as seen and defined up until the present time and how this can be seen through the lens of agency. For instance, ‘the innocent child’ who was born innocent and pure who doesn’t have agency and requires protection and care from adults. Then there was ‘the evil child’ which normalized abuse and infanticide thinking this would be the right way to deal with such a child (ibid.). Another typology was that of ‘child as victim’ who is powerless and unnoticed. The final typology amongst the ten types was of ‘the agentic child’ who has the support of caring adults, whose voice is heard and respected, which empowers the child to participate and collaborate with them (Sorin and Galloway, 2006). The authors argued in favor of providing tools of resilience for the development of children, and a way to heal and give voice to those who have been abused or traumatized.

To add further thoughts into thinking about agency and childhood, Gallagher (2019) uses insights from Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault and Bennet and argues:

1. Agency lacks intrinsic ethical value and must be contextually analysed.
2. Focusing on individual children’s agency is limiting; instead, agency arises in dynamic “assemblages.” I understood assemblages as network of interconnected elements, ideas, actions, that come together in a specific arrangement, shaping what they collectively produce.

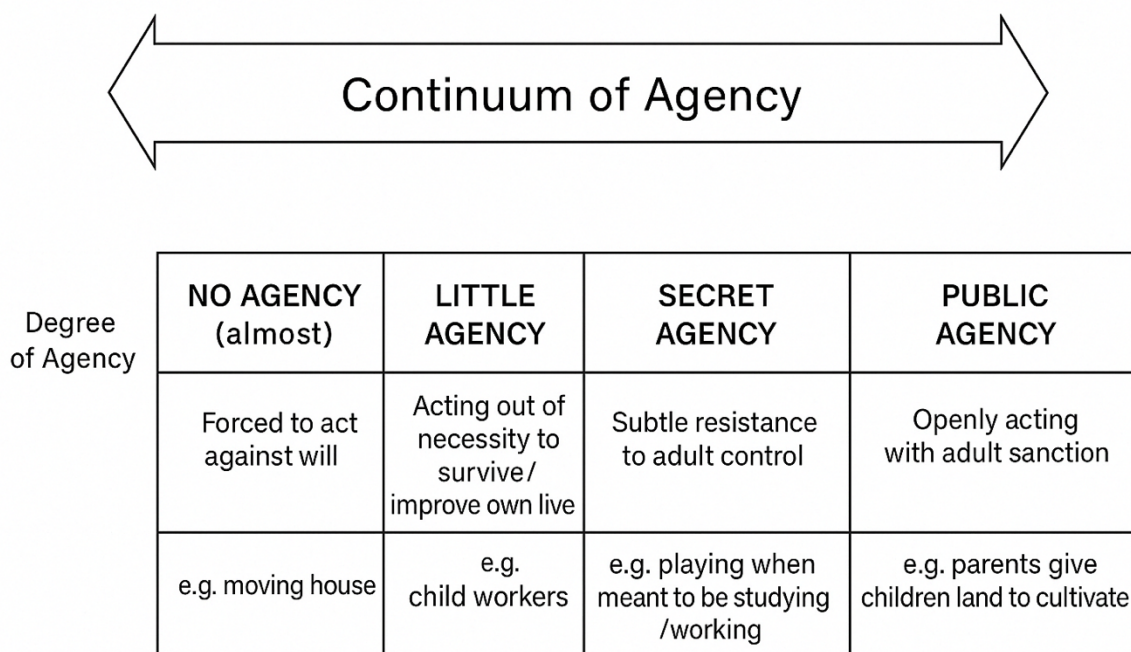
3. Agency ranges from routine, pattern-following behaviours to inventive, disruptive ones, neither being inherently superior.
4. The organic and inorganic—movement and stability—are tendencies that can interact in agency.

There has been a shift from viewing young people as passive, dependents or victims to those having agency, i.e., capacity to act and shape their own lives (Robson et al., 2007). The authors advocate for viewing young people as agents, doers and thinkers, and that any understanding of agency must include the two aspects of ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’. Developments have challenged notions of children being powerless and weak but rather empowered young people, who not only “experience obligations and restrictions, but actively define, produce and reclaim space as well” (Robson et al., 2007, p.136). The authors had adapted Panelli et al’s (2005) elements of agency to their own example of rural children in their study. These elements are social contexts, personal biography, spatial relations and cultural discourses that shape one’s experience of agency in unique ways. To consider and reflect on the same in the context of UASCs and young people, here is an adaptation of these elements.

Figure 3 – Elements of Agency

Source: Adapted from Panelli et al., 2005, 499)

Acknowledging the diverse and dynamic element of agency, Robson et al., (2007) identified and suggested a ‘Continuum of Agency’ which suggests that a young person’s experience of agency changes “depending on who they are with, what they are doing, and where they are. A young person may experience a lack of agency in some areas of their lives but can exercise agency in other areas, and an individual moves along the continuum accordingly over time and in relation to decisions that are made” (Robson et al., 2007, p. 144).

Figure 4 – Continuum of agency

Source: Robson et al., 2007, 144

Advocating for understanding young people's agency on this continuum, and for a deeper examination of reasoning behind the agency and the decision-making process behind actions to develop links between context, agency and young people's position within the said power relations or structures. Here is an adapted version to UASCs to consider:

Table 2 – Continuum of Agency for UASCs and young people

Degree of Agency	No agency (almost)	Little agency	Secret agency	Public agency
Description	Forcing to act against their will	Acting out of necessity to survive/improve own lives	Subtle resistance to authority	Openly acting with adult permission
Examples	<p>Being relocated between accommodations with little to no notice (For eg: Refugee Action, n.d.)</p> <p>Being relocated to different</p>	<p>Surviving on little food or unfamiliar food (For eg: Taylor, 2024)</p>	<p>Socializing with other asylum seekers</p> <p>Traveling to previous town/city to meet friends</p>	<p>Attending trainings or school programs with permission and support (For eg: Refugee Education UK, n.d.)</p>

	town/city (For eg: The Times, 2025)			Advocating for other asylum seekers or forming youth groups (For eg: Big leaf through their Young Leaders programs, 2024)
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Source: adapted after Robson et al., 2007, p.144

Abebe (2019) also argued in favor of recognizing agency as a continuum after Robson et al (2007) and additionally through the framework of ‘interdependent agency’ which can illustrate children and young people’s everyday contexts and relational processes and situating it within their own intersectional experiences. According to Abebe (2019), interdependent agency highlights children’s agency as something that is negotiated and renegotiated with people they interact with

and within their different contexts and at different times. Therefore, agency cannot be viewed through the ideal of western individualism which separates children and young people from their wider social and cultural contexts, and that rights and competencies are developed through participation in social and cultural practices and interactions (Durham, 2011; Kjørholt, 2005, as cited in Abebe, 2019). Focus on the individual is unlikely to represent true agency for children and young people within collective cultures but also more generally in relation to their experiences in relation to adults, peers, and various structures. There is also an argument against quantifying agency which can have multiple and contradictory dimensions, and that it is a qualitative notion which can only be described contextually (Durham, 2011; Abebe, 2019). Instead, agency can be best understood when looking at what kind of agency, its context and dynamics.

Similar to Abebe (2019) and Robson et al (2007), Klocker (2007) expands on this type of agency through introducing concepts of ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ agency. Here, thin agency refers to decisions and actions which are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, whereas thick agency is acting within broad range of options (Klocker, 2007) which are helpful to understand it in terms of factors that can be ‘layering’ and ‘eroding’ a young person’s agency. This is also particularly useful within this research project, as it allows me to highlight what acts as ‘thickeners’ and ‘thinners’ of UASC and young people’s agency within their asylum journey.

Both, Robson et al (2007) and Klocker's (2007) research emphasize on the presence of agency in all situations even when it seems like it doesn't exist, once can still find evidence of it and that one's agency cannot be completely denied. "There are several approaches to the idea that population generally considered powerless do not entirely lack agency, but maintain alternative forms of power constituted in complex webs of informal (invisible) networks of resistance put up (quietly) against prevailing restrictive power relations" (Robson et al., 2007, p.138). An important and helpful point of reflection is that both researchers have also advocated for conducting research in such a way, that participation in the research process for the young people can be a thickener of their agency. This is something that I myself have been mindful of through the research project and reflected on it in all stages.

Gleitman and Nir (2022) and Toiviainen (2022) advocate for understanding agency through a relational lens, emphasizing its dynamic emergence through interaction. Notably, Gleitman and Nir (2022) highlight the importance of addressing power imbalances, as child agency is often legitimized only through adult perspectives. They caution against viewing children's participation in adult-child activities as impulsive or uninformed, as this diminishes their agentic capacity (ibid). This perspective implies that all actions and behaviours should be seen as intentional and meaningful. Similarly, Toiviainen (2022) introduces the concept of "co-agency," framing agency as a collective, rather

than an individual, process and emphasizing its contextual nature, shaped by interactions among children, adults, and broader social forces (ibid).

In the context of school-based therapy, Cedar et al. (2022), citing Kellett (2019), argue that participation, voice, and agency are essential to honouring children's rights. The authors distinguish "voice"—the right to express views freely—from "agency," which encompasses translating these views into actions and effecting change. Clarifying these terms is valuable as they are often used interchangeably. Cedar et al. (2022) assert that children's agency is fostered through the interplay of voice, agency, and therapeutic context, described as a "co-production" between therapist and child. They note that gathering children's perspectives is essential to enhancing therapeutic impact. Supporting this, Sirkko et al. (2019) found that active listening to children builds confidence and promotes a sense of agency. Open-ended activities like arts and crafts further enable children to experience control and choice, which enhances agency (ibid), while unstructured settings allow for clearer expressions of agency (Mathers & Jonathan, 2013).

Research also highlights that teachers require training to recognize and integrate child agency into practice, particularly in foreign language education (Waddington, 2023). Waddington points out that play, often seen as merely a tool for achieving learning goals, is underutilized as a medium for promoting agency. In contrast, Mathews and Jonathan (2013) found that play fosters

curiosity, exploration, and creativity, underscoring its role in developing agency.

Research studies of Tomanovic (2018) and Bell & Payne (2009) offer valuable and distinctive perspectives into youth agency. Tomanović's study uses longitudinal qualitative research to examine how young people's agency in Belgrade changes over time, emphasizing the role of evolving contexts and the biographization of agency—the way youth relate their agency to personal identity. This long-term, context-sensitive method provides a robust framework for understanding shifts in agency over two decades. Conversely, Bell & Payne (2009) explore youth agency within development contexts in Zambia and Uganda, focusing on young people's efforts to navigate power dynamics and contribute to community development. They highlight the challenges and opportunities young people face when taking control of their lives under complex social conditions. By examining young people's roles as community change agents, Bell & Payne reveal the diverse ways youth can enact agency amid difficult social and economic settings. Tomanović's (2018) longitudinal approach offers depth in examining individual life histories over an extended period, revealing the nuanced evolution of agency. However, it is limited to a specific geographic and socioeconomic context, potentially reducing the generalizability of findings. Bell & Payne (2009), on the other hand, provide

cross-national insights, contributing a broader view but with less depth on personal trajectories of change.

Considering agency in political context, Jacob Lind (2017) ethnographic study in the UK highlights the ways children in deportable migrant families assert political agency, rejecting stigmatized identities and reinforcing a sense of belonging. Lind's focus on "deportable" children provides a unique lens on agency, capturing how young individuals navigate and resist imposed legal identities. The strength of Lind's research lies in its use of ethnographic methods, capturing children's nuanced responses to their vulnerable status. The study may not be applicable to non-Western contexts. In another geographical context, White and Choudhury (2007) study examines child participation in development contexts in Bangladesh, critiquing how "projectisation" and resource constraints influence agency. Their work is valuable for problematizing the assumption that participation alone equates to empowerment, showing how children's agency can be constrained by external developmental models. The study's emphasis on survival rights foregrounds a pressing ethical issue. Both studies critically explore children's agency in constrained contexts, with Lind (2017) focusing on resistance within a deportation framework and White & Choudhury (2007) analysing structural limitations in development participation. Together, these studies illustrate the dual nature of child agency, balancing individual expressions of resistance and

broader structural influences, providing valuable insights for policies promoting genuine youth empowerment.

Section 3 - Agency and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Young People

2.10 Agency in the Context of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Some literature explores or addresses the agency of refugees and asylum seekers in different contexts. Obschonka et al. (2017) examined personal agency among newly arrived refugees in Germany, finding that individual personality traits play a significant role in the integration process. They also called for further research into refugees' experiences from an agentic perspective. Kanak and Rottmann (2021) proposed an interdisciplinary approach to understanding refugee agency, framing it as the capacity to act within structural constraints. Their research is particularly notable for its focus on refugee women's agency, examining how they rebuild their lives beyond the polarized views of being either victims or liberated from their patriarchal society through a Western lens. The study identified gendered and cultural manifestations of agency by analysing the women's stressors and coping strategies. Kanak and Rottmann (2021) further emphasized the importance of understanding the contextual

forms of agency and called for additional similar research to better support refugee women. Kallio (2019), on the other hand, observed through research that refugee agency is influenced by unique political dimensions, which can either strengthen or challenge family relationships. The author noted that political familial agency is often overlooked, negatively affecting various humanitarian efforts. As the refugee predicament is a political one, research into political agency within families, how this is understood, navigated and practiced would make for important research. Reflecting on political agency, Omata (2017) noted that governing bodies often discouraged or banned political activities in refugee camps, viewing them as disruptive or troublesome. Despite the criminalization of political activities and protests, resistance and opposition to authorities were common. The researcher highlighted the contradictory nature of humanitarian work, which sought to suppress refugees' agency and participation. Omata (2017) argued that this activism should be recognized and understood as an expression of agency.

Ramachandran and Vathi (2002) explored agency in terms of the control that asylum seekers or refugees have, or feel they have, when encountering structural barriers. Their research included 30 participants of varying ages, comprising both adults who had received a legal status and those still awaiting it, as well as 20 staff members. The study found that even the waiting period could be meaningful and active, with participants employing three tactics to

navigate this time: gaining familiarity, engaging in meaningful activities, and establishing social connections. The research highlighted how time was spent constructively despite the challenges of waiting; however, it presumed the asylum system to be a barrier in its premise.

Ghorashi et al. (2018), citing Giddens (1984), noted that structures are both constraining and enabling, emphasizing that individuals under control often find ways to evade and resist. The authors identified two forms of agency among asylum seekers in the liminal or "in-between" space: delayed agency and agency from marginal positions. While Ramachandran and Vathi (2002) focused on meaningful engagement during the waiting period, Ghorashi et al. (2018) emphasized how meaning could emerge in "non-places" such as asylum centres. Their research aimed to showcase the other side of the prolonged waiting period, where creativity and reflection can flourish, and how the time and spaces asylum seekers occupy can foster meaning and different forms of agency. Another notable creative expression of refugee agency was observed in performative theatre in Germany, which highlighted the cultural sphere of refugee activism beyond the streets and camps (Bhimji, 2015).

Noting a lack of focus on the experiences of accompanied children, Ottosan et al. (2017) examined the experiences of asylum-seeking minors under parental care in Sweden. The authors found evidence of these minors' agency in their ability to avoid situations they found uncomfortable, pursue personal projects,

and create space for themselves in Swedish society. Similarly, Shaheen (2020) explored the experiences of Palestinian accompanied minors in the Yarmouk refugee camp, focusing on their agency in challenging the frequent portrayal of vulnerability. Shaheen (2020) noted that the Yarmouk minors pursued creativity and change despite facing trauma and multiple displacements. They demonstrated their agency through poetry recitation and singing about their homeland, which the author cited as a “cultural form” (Said, 1993, 1994, as cited in Shaheen, 2020).

Reviewing this in the context of the ongoing devastation and humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza serves as a stark reminder of the importance of recognizing and honouring Palestinian representation in all its forms.

2.11 Agency in the Context of UASCs and Young People

This section specifically examines the literature addressing agency within the context of Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.

According to research by Verdasco (2019) on unaccompanied refugees in asylum centres in Denmark, the nature of young refugees’ agency was found to be deeply social, as they constructed meaning and relatedness through their relationships and activities. Evidence of agency emerged through a collective lens, challenging the more individualistic notion of youth agency.

Unaccompanied minors actively formed relationships with both peers and adults, with agency expressed through shared activities and interactions. The author suggested further exploration of the role of relationships in young refugees' lives, particularly the interplay between older relationships from their home countries and newer ones formed in the host country. In relation to unaccompanied minors and their families, Belloni (2020) highlights that not all young people leave their countries with their families' consent. Instead, the research found instances of minors undertaking journeys independently, exercising individual agency and pursuing personal aspirations to escape protracted crises. This challenges the common perspective of unaccompanied minors leaving due to family decisions or in Belloni (2020)'s words, it being a 'family project'.

Chase (2010) and Crawley (2020) explored agency within the context of silence and self-expression among unaccompanied minors. Chase (2010) argued that unaccompanied minors demonstrate agency by deciding what and how much to disclose about their past or present experiences while seeking asylum. Silence or selective disclosure was framed as a means of retaining agency (Chase, 2010). The author emphasized the importance of support workers understanding this perspective to better work with unaccompanied minors, enabling them to maintain a sense of agency while receiving appropriate support, rather than being labelled as difficult or non-compliant. Crawley's (2020) research, on the

other hand, examined how young people's expression of political views or agency often leads to them being perceived as not childlike. This aligns with Wernesjö's (2011) observation that only children seen as vulnerable were deemed deserving of support, while assertive or less vulnerable young people were offered less assistance. Crawley (2020) further found that asylum interviews with unaccompanied minors were often hostile and lacked sensitivity. The author highlighted the need for the interview process and the broader asylum system to foster a humane and supportive environment to encourage young people to safely express themselves.

Highlighting the complexity of their experiences, Morgan (2020) identified conversion as a form of agency for unaccompanied minors in Sweden. The author found that, away from the watchful eyes of their families, these young people were able to explore and question their beliefs. Through exposure to a multiplicity of views, some chose to convert to Christianity, thereby demonstrating their agency. Morgan (2020) also examined the contrast between Christian ideals and the lived experiences of the participants' religion, noting that their experiences did not necessarily reflect the religion itself. Some young people associated their perceptions of religion with the behaviours of certain adults. The author observed that these conversions enabled the young people to gain social and cultural capital by building new communities, finding a sense of belonging, and engaging in church activities, further illustrating their agency. In

another study conducted in Sweden, Wedin (2020) examined the relationship between agency and literacy levels in UASCs. The research found agency to be dynamic, with young people experiencing both agentic and vulnerable positions. Language literacy in the host country was identified as essential for interaction and emphasized the importance of its development and adequate support.

While some unique and insightful research has contributed to understanding the agency of UASCs and young people, this field holds significant potential for further exploration and development, particularly within the UK context.

3. METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodological foundations of this research project, detailing its aims, process, and execution, that is, what the research sought to achieve and how these objectives were addressed.

It begins by presenting the study's aims and research questions, followed by a discussion of the rationale for the chosen research paradigm. This section provides an overview of the participant population, data collection process, and analytical methods. The application of thematic analysis within this qualitative study is explored in depth, as it was selected to align with the research aims. It concludes with a discussion of the study's ethical considerations, my researcher positionality, and the methodological limitations.

This research focuses on understanding the experiences of young people who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied minors. Therefore, the terms ‘UASCs’ (Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children) and ‘young people’ are both used throughout the study. In this context, ‘young people’ refers to individuals who have turned 18 years of age or older.

3.1 Research Design and Approach

3.1.1 Research Questions

The formulation of research questions is integral to guiding a research project, shaping its focus, and informing the development of research instruments and protocols (Atkinson, 2017). In this study, the research questions emerged from a gap in the literature, specifically the underexplored relationship between agency and the lived experiences of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.

This research seeks to examine whether and how unaccompanied young people experience agency while claiming asylum in the UK, as well as to explore the nature of these experiences. A range of factors can influence a young person’s sense of agency, some facilitating its development, while others might obstruct or diminish it. This study aims to identify the elements that support unaccompanied children in gaining a sense of agency, as well as the barriers

that hinder their agency and personal growth in a new environment. By doing so, the research contributes to a broader understanding of the lives of UASC and young people and critically examines the concept of agency within the asylum system.

The central objective of this study is to explore how agency is experienced by UASC throughout the asylum process, up until they are granted leave to remain. More specifically, the research seeks to understand what these experiences of agency look like, which factors foster or constrain agency, and how agency influences young people's self-perception during this period.

The primary research questions guiding this research were:

1. How is agency experienced, if at all, by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and young people until leave to remain is granted?
2. What are the possible facilitators in UASC and young people gaining a sense of agency during the asylum claim?
3. What are the possible barriers, if any, that lead to the loss of agency among UASC and young people during the asylum claim?
4. What role does agency play in the overall perception UASC and young people hold of themselves, and how might this perception been formed?

3.1.2 Qualitative Research

Considering the research questions of the thesis, which looks towards understanding the lived experience of agency of the participants, this is a qualitative research study.

The rationale behind selecting a qualitative approach is because it is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014) and it is an “emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes” (Yilmaz, 2013, p.312).

While there can be many points made in the qualitative vs quantitative approach debate regarding their suitability for different research studies, in the context of this thesis, I use Yilmaz’s (2013) argument that because the quantitative approach follows a deductive method, it fails to provide insight into participant’s individual or personal experiences. Further, “They do not let the respondents describe their feelings, thoughts, frames of reference, and experiences in their own words” Yilmaz, 2013, p. 313). As quantitative research relies on explaining phenomena through quantified data and analyzing it using mathematical methods (Yilmaz, 2013), it does not align with my research question which aims to understand experiences and provide flexibility to participants. Additionally, a quantitative approach assumes that reality is

singular and tangible, with the purpose being for generalizability, and that the researcher remains completely impartial and detached (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In contrast, and pertinent to this thesis, the qualitative mode of inquiry assumes that realities are multiple, constructed and holistic, with the purpose of contextualization and understanding actors' perspectives, while also acknowledging the bias and involvement of the researcher in the process (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Before delving further into the details of this study, it is important to note the difference between the terms 'methodology' and 'methods', which are often used synonymously but hold different meanings and purposes (Lukenchuk, 2017). Methodology is defined as 'the examination of the possible plans to be carried out, the journeys to undertaken, so that an understanding of phenomena can be obtained' (Polkinghorne, 1983, p.5 as cited in Lukenchuk, 2017).

Methodology can be understood as the overarching research process which integrates *the what* and *the how*, whereas, method refers to the *how* of the research, the specific activities used to achieve the results. Method, therefore, is "a systematic and orderly process of employing specific procedures, tools, instruments, techniques, and/or measurements, each of which depends on the requirements of a particular research design" (Lukenchuk, 2017, p.60).

Creswell (2014) illustrated a comprehensive framework to understand the foundations of research, which consists of its philosophical worldviews, design and methods. The four primary paradigms or worldviews or ontology and epistemology are considered to be the positivist/post-positivist, post-modern/post-structural, constructionist, and critical paradigms (Merriam, 2009; Yilmaz, 2013). The Constructivist worldview which is often combined with interpretivism (Creswell, 2014) or referred to as constructivist/interpretive (Merriam, 2009) is understood as an approach to qualitative research where individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences. Creswell (2014) explains that “these meanings can be varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into few categories or ideas” (p. 8). Furthermore, the goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on participants views of the situation being studied. These views are usually socially or historically rooted, formed through interactions with others (therefore also called social constructivism) and situated within a specific context (Creswell, 2014). An important accepted reality in this worldview is that researchers own backgrounds can influence the interpretation. Researchers position themselves within the research to acknowledge their personal experiences (Creswell, 2014). Another key element underlying a research approach is a research design which refers to the type of inquiry that provide a particular direction for the research. Some complimentary research

designs suited to a qualitative approach include narrative inquiry, phenomenology, ethnography, etc. (Creswell, 2014).

This research seeks to understand the experiences of agency among unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and young people, as well as the perspectives of professionals working with them.

Therefore, this qualitative research is grounded in specific philosophical assumptions:

Ontology (Nature of Reality):

The research adopts a relativist ontology, where reality is considered to be 'relative,' meaning that multiple realities are accepted (Yilmaz, 2013). This suggests that experiences, overall, are not objective. In the context of UASCs and young people, agency is shaped by their personal experiences and interactions with their environments. By acknowledging multiple realities, this research values the diversity of perspectives from both the young people and the professionals, whose experiences are influenced by various factors.

Epistemology (Nature of Knowledge):

The study follows a constructivist and social constructivist epistemology, which explores how individuals come to know what they know. This research holds that knowledge is constructed through interactions, contexts, and human

experiences, where subjective meanings are socially and historically negotiated. As Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 24) state, 'individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work,' highlighting the importance of meaning-making in their lived experiences.

This framework shapes the research approach and interpretation of findings.

Lastly, the method used in the methodology consists of interviews as the form of data collection and thematic analysis as the method of data analysis. This is explored in further depth in this section.

3.2 Participants/Sample

The primary population in this study consists of young people who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied minors and sought asylum, regardless of their country of origin. The inclusion criteria required that participants be 18 years or older at the time of the interview, have received a form of legal status; refugee status or leave to remain, and have been unaccompanied and under the age of 18 at the time of their arrival and asylum claim in the UK.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a method that involves identifying and selecting individuals with knowledge or experience related to a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants with specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research question, ensuring that the data collected is meaningful

and applicable (Kelly, 2010). Purposive sampling is considered suitable for selecting participants that may be from a difficult to reach population (Neuman, 2003). The exclusion criteria applied to individuals who had not yet reached the age of 18 and those who had not received a legal status.

The rationale behind these inclusion and exclusion criteria was primarily safeguarding, ensuring that participation in the study would not raise concerns about the intent of the interview or have any potential impact on participants' asylum applications. Additionally, having already received a legal status could help mitigate any suspicion regarding the intent of the research and also contribute to some level of stability, allowing for engagement with the research process. The age criterion of 18 was determined to simplify the consent procedure, as it avoided the need for legal guardian consent, which would have been required if participants were minors.

From my experience working with UASCs and young people, having received a legal status can contribute positively to their overall wellbeing, which was a key consideration in shaping the inclusion criteria as a protective factor. This was intended to allow participants to engage in the research without significant distress or concern. However, this criterion also posed a limitation, as it excluded a significant number of young people who had not yet received legal status, even if they might have interest in participating.

Mann (2016) suggests that the number of interviews conducted in a qualitative study is often determined by the research design, with most qualitative studies including between 6 to 12 interviews. Palinkas et al. (2015) further emphasize that a small but purposefully selected sample can be effective in qualitative research. In this study, the goal was to recruit a sufficient number of participants to generate rich data while also considering the practical feasibility of conducting interviews.

The initial ethical application sought approval to interview six-eight participants, and four participants were successfully recruited. To increase participation, a second ethical application was submitted, seeking approval to interview up to ten additional participants if possible. As a result, three more participants were recruited, bringing the final sample size of the primary population to seven.

Table 3 - Primary Population Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
18 years and above	Under the age of 18 years
Sought Asylum in the UK as an unaccompanied minor i.e. without	Sought asylum with family

family and when they were under the age of 18.	
Received a refugee/leave to remain status in the last 3-6 years	Have not received a status/positive decision on asylum application
Some English language	No English language

Table 4 - Demographical Details of the Primary Participants

Participant	Gender	Age on arrival	Age at interview	Nationality	Status Received
P1	M	16	19	Sudan	5 year Leave to Remain
P2	F	16	19	Eritrea	5 year leave to remain
P3	F	16	18	Eritrea	5 year leave to remain
P4	M	15	20	Kurdistan	Humanitarian Protection
P5	M	17	18	Sudan	5 year leave to remain

P6	M	16	19	Afghanistan	5 year leave to remain
P7	M	12	18	Afghanistan	British Citizenship

The secondary population being studied are professionals and staff who have experience working with and supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people, and who are over the age of 18 years old. The intention behind interviewing and including professionals was to supplement the primary participants data, to provide a larger context and insight into the experiences of unaccompanied minors and young people.

In order to supplement the primary data, permission was sought to interview five-eight secondary population participants. Seven secondary population participants were interviewed for the research study.

Table 5 - Secondary Population Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
18 years and above	Under the age of 18 years
Experience working with or supporting UASCs and young people	Experience only with refugees or asylum seekers but not with UASCs and young people

Table 6 - Demographical Details of Secondary Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Role/Roles	Years of experience in the field/role
P1	49	F	ESOL teacher, caseworker	16+
P2	53	F	Co-founder & program manager of Charity	10+
P3	28	F	Youth Welfare Officer	4+
P4	55	F	Foster Carer, former case worker	10
P5	31	F	Drama therapist	4+
P6	54	F	Foster Carer, former caseworker	8+
P7	75	F	Writer, researcher, formerly worked in Educational & cultural spaces like head of equality and diversity and teaching.	50

3.3 Data Collection Method

3.3.1 Interview

Qualitative research interviews attempt to understand the world from the subjects' point of view (Kvale, 1996) making them particularly valuable for exploring the lived experiences of unaccompanied young people. As this study examines UASC and young people's sense of agency during the asylum process, as well as professionals thoughts on the same, interviews provide a means to access their perceptions, interactions and meaning making processes (Mann, 2016; Weiss, 1994). Further, interviews can allow sensitivity and insights into aspects of language and the choices made in the process of the interviews (Man, 2016). Given the possibilities of asylum interviews being challenging for young people, it was essential the interviews feel conversational, young person led and not contentious or interrogatory. It was important the participants experienced the interviews as thoughtful and safe spaces.

3.3.2 Semi Structured Interviews

I opted to conduct semi structured interviews. Gubrium et al (2012) explain that semi structured interviews consist of a question stem, to which the participant

may respond freely and they can be asked probing questions which are either planned or those which arise from the participant's response.

Having a few pre-determined questions can set the base for a conversation as well as address aspects of the participants experience. It allows flexibility of addressing responses from the participants in the moment. A guide can be helpful for the researcher however, a very rigid structure and line of questioning can make the participant feeling interrogated and overwhelmed. This format was therefore well suited as it provided a structured yet open ended approach that allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words while also being helpful in ensuring key themes relevant to the research could emerge.

3.3.3 Advantages of Semi Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview is considered a popular data collection method as it has proved to be both versatile and flexible. It can be combined with both individual and group interview methods (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

One of its main advantages is that the semi-structured interview method has been found to successfully enable reciprocity between the interviewer and participant (Galletta, 2012) which is key in this context. This reciprocity was particularly important in research with the young people who may have had varied interactions with authority figures. Semi structured interviews helped facilitate and negotiate ease of discussion while keeping the young person's

wellbeing at the core. They also allow for flexibility, enabling the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on the participant's responses (Hardon et al. 2004, Rubin & Rubin 2005, Polit & Beck 2010) which proved extremely useful.

According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1989), semi-structured interviews provide a reassuring structure while ensuring there is no pressure to stick to a pre-determined script; this allows the opportunity to develop an 'equilibrium' between the interviewer and the interviewee. In addition, Mann (2016) states that the semi-structured format provides room for negotiation, discussion and expansion of the interviewee's responses as discussed in the previous paragraph. This indicates the helpful balance between structure and flexibility, which made it a useful method in this research.

Kallio et al (2016), in a research study considering their prior work on certain research topics, noted that the semi-structured interview method was suitable for studying people's perceptions and opinions. Barriball & While (1994) found this method useful for exploring complex and sensitive issues. According to Cridland et al. (2015), semi-structured interviews helped focus on the issues that were meaningful to participants and allowed for the expression of diverse perceptions.

Bernard (1988) stated that semi structured interviews are a good option when there is only one opportunity for an interview, which was significant and relevant in the context of this research. Having been part of the asylum process, these young refugees have possibly attended many meetings and appointments beyond their control. It was important that they felt they had a choice in deciding how much time they wanted to commit to this research and whether they wished to be interviewed at all. There was always the option of extending the interview to two meetings if that was more suitable and convenient for the participant. This consideration took into account the length of one sitting; which was not intended to be exhausting for either the participant or me. It was also important to be mindful that certain aspects might not be addressed within one session, and that the participants be offered the opportunity to talk about them in another meeting. In this research, all participants chose to have only one interview. This approach aimed to counteract young peoples prior experiences of lacking control and was therefore design to be collaborative and participant led. There was flexibility regarding the length of the interview and the level of detail participants wanted to share. I sought to foster a reflective space.

In a research project, Wiseman (2016) explored a creative way of allowing young refugees to express themselves by taking photographs. However, she found that many of them were unable to understand the intent of the activity and there was some miscommunication through interpreters. She found semi

structured interviews to be more fruitful in the research. While I would have liked to consider another creative way for young people to express themselves, it was also important to choose a method which was simple and straightforward, requiring minimal explanation. I did not think that giving young people a task as part of the research would be beneficial, and I felt it was important to keep it contained within our interaction. Since the research started at the peak of COVID 19 pandemic, a semi structured approach seemed feasible as it could be conducted online or via the phone. Conducting the interviews online allowed for the inclusion of both young people and professionals from across the country, providing a wider variety of experiences and perspectives. It helped overcome geographical barriers. Only 3 out of 14 participants were located locally, and making online accessibility a beneficial factor in the research.

With respect to this research, interview questions were developed with the aim of building rapport and easing the participant into conversation. The questions then progressed to addressing different aspects of their life in the UK, including education, accommodation, asylum process, services received, relationships, etc providing a framework to gather insight and data on their lived experience. The first interview with a participant or a pilot interview, helped in anticipating and preparing for various possibilities such as technical or communication delays, the importance of being flexible with participants, allowing time for

clarification, recognizing unique ways individuals respond and understanding the extent of information shared in an interview.

3.3.4 Conducting the Interview

While the data collected for a research is crucial to the study itself, Harris et al (2003) concluded that it is important to acknowledge the process of data collection as it can be as instructive as the data itself. In this section, both the logistics of the interview process and the recruitment process are detailed.

The logistics of interviewing-

Location - The place of the interview should be a comfortable environment with minimal background noise and distractions. It is also important to consider factors such as convenience, power dynamics and impact of the location selected (Mann, 2016). As this research began during the COVID 19 pandemic, interviews were conducted online to adhere to safety regulations and mitigate risks for both participants and I. Utmost care was taken to schedule interviews at a time and day convenient for participants while ensuring that the online space was safe and comfortable.

Number of meetings – Both sets of participants were asked to commit to a 60-minute interview session. This decision was made to manage expectations, ensuring that sufficient data could be collected while also respecting

participants time and not making them feel overburdened by the research project. There was always the option of offering another session if the participants preferred to split the interview in two sessions or take a break. However, all participants chose to complete the interview in a single session. The duration of interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour 45 minutes.

Language Context – It is important to note that all interviews were conducted in English. The young people as primary participants were offered the option of an interpreter during the first round of recruitment however they chose not to access that and they had varying levels of English fluency. The secondary population participants were all professionals working in the UK who used English either as a first language or in professional settings. Interviewing in a second language rather than the native or first language can be limiting and may affect how well the interviewee is able to express themselves (Mann, 2016). However any and all information shared by participants was valuable, as was paying attention to the process itself. Conducting interviews in single language maintained uniformity in the research and eliminated the potential impact of an interpreter on the interviews or data collection process.

The Interview Questions for both sets of participants are included in Appendices E and F. The questions developed for both the primary and secondary participants were designed with careful consideration of the study's focus on agency. For the primary participants, the initial questions were intended to build

rapport and create a supportive environment. Subsequent questions explored various aspects of their lived experiences, including their lives prior to arriving in the UK, their initial impressions of the UK, interactions with the Home Office and the asylum process, the services they accessed, and their experiences of relationships, accommodation, and support networks. As agency is conceptualised in this study as the capacity to act, make choices and exert influence over one's life, these questions were specifically formulated to elicit young people's perceptions and experiences of their own agency across their refugee journey.

Similarly, for the secondary participants, the questions first invited participants to share their professional backgrounds, before exploring their experiences of working with unaccompanied young people. Through these accounts, participants were asked to reflect on how they had witnessed young people's agency in the context of the asylum system and their life in the UK. Finally, secondary participants were also asked to reflect on their own experiences of working within the system, enabling insight into their own actions, constraints, and perceptions of agency in their professional roles.

3.4 Recruitment Process

To recruit participants for the research, adverts and participation information sheets, along with a summary of the project and my biography, was shared with over 60 organisations across the UK. These organisations were humanitarian or

charity organisations working with refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in various capacities. They were contacted through their websites or via professionals known within the organisations. Many organisations worked specifically with unaccompanied children and young people, while others supported diverse refugees and asylum seekers through different projects. Two ethical applications were submitted to the University of Essex to continue the recruitment process, as these approvals are time bound and valid for a limited duration. The recruitment therefore took place in two phases, with some organisations being contacted again during the second round. The entire process was conducted between 2021 till 2024, based on consultations with my supervisor, considerations for sufficient data collection and allowances for delays and flexibility. It was observed that COVID-19 had a significant impact on charity organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers, and they were unable to support with research requests. This impact was evident during the peak of the pandemic and throughout the various lockdowns. However, even in 2024, organisations were still reporting a lack of capacity to engage with research requests. I will now illustrate the recruitment process with gatekeepers reflexively and in more detail.

3.4.1 Working with Gatekeepers

‘Gatekeepers’ are individuals, organizations or groups that act as intermediaries between researchers and participants in the research process (De Laine, 2000).

Gatekeepers, therefore, play a significant role and De Laine (2000) states they have the power to withhold or provide access to individuals who are required for the research. Cassell (1988) (as cited in Clark, 2010) makes a useful distinction between physical access and social access. Gatekeepers can facilitate physical access by sharing contact details, but this does not guarantee social access or acceptance within the group. Given the specific inclusion criterion for primary population participants and the requirement of experience working with UASCs and young people for secondary population participants, it was important to contact relevant organizations to ensure that the information reached the right demographic. To generate interest from potential participants, I relied on gatekeepers to share the information within their teams, with colleagues and with their clients i.e., the young people they support.

Some organizations require researchers to complete research forms requesting detailed information about the study; including ethical approval, the number of participants being sought, interview questions, time commitment, reimbursement, researcher background, etc. Having completed some of these forms, I received a range of responses. One organization requested additional information after I submitted the form, however, I did not receive a response after providing the requested details. Another organization contacted me to inform that they do not have capacity to support research projects at that time. I held two online meetings with two organizations which was attended by a

research coordinator and a senior management personnel. Both meetings focused on understanding the research and my background. This seemed particularly important to them in assessing whether the interviews could be conducted with care and whether I had the necessary experience to work with a vulnerable population. My clinical experience seemed to be reassuring and this was contrasted with concerns around another research request where the person did not have any research or professional experience of working with young asylum-seeking populations. Eventually, one of these organizations informed me that they do not have the capacity to identify young people suitable for the research. The other organization requested for a more concise interview protocol and questionnaire. Based on their experience, they suggested that a few well-chosen questions could elicit valuable data and had been effective for their organization. Although I provided them with a more concise document, I received no further communication from them.

Additionally, I had an online meeting with a UASC leaving care team in a county in England. A Foster Carer facilitated my introduction to the team lead. During this meeting, I presented an overview of the research, and the team had the opportunity to ask me questions. They were happy to share the information within their network, however, I did not receive any expressions of interests or participants following this meeting.

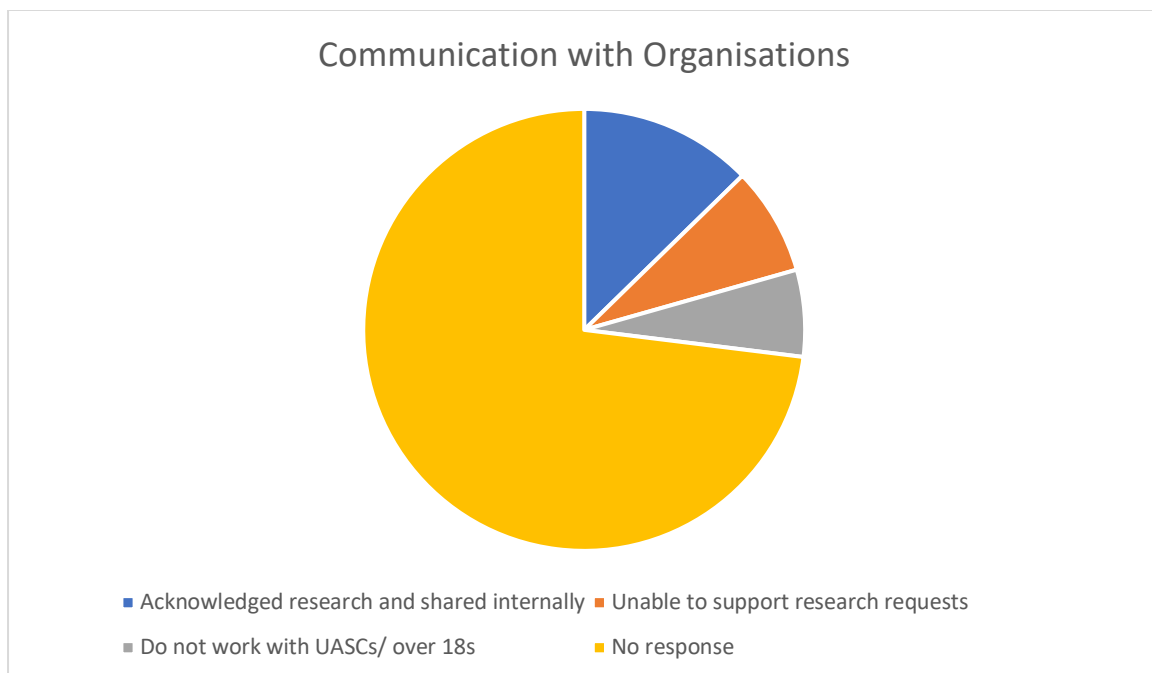
General responses and communication with 63 organizations that were

contacted:

- 4 organizations said they do not work with over 18s or UASCs and therefore cannot support.
- 8 organisations acknowledged the research and stated that they would share the information internally with staff and young people, and encourage participation.
- 5 organizations stated they cannot help with research requests.
- Some organizations suggested other groups and projects to contact as additional ways to support.
- There were no responses from majority of the organizations contacted.

This represented visually in the figure below –

Figure 5 – Communication with Organizations



Working with gatekeepers is not a straightforward process. Various conversations take place before professionals or staff at organizations consider sharing research information with anyone. Considerable time and effort were invested in clarifying queries and addressing doubts posed by gatekeepers, along with multiple follow up emails to check whether any internal discussions had yielded results. During this process, some individuals became the primary contacts at organizations with whom I liaised over several months. Their efforts to support the recruitment process was evident in their communication. One of the co-founders of an organization shared that the young people at her organization had recently participated in another research project, which was managed well, but they had found it exhausting. She further explained that they might not feel inclined to participate in yet another research study so soon. After sharing her instinctive response, she added, ‘I don't want to be their gatekeeper on this, so I'm happy to ask them and give them the choice.’ This was quite insightful as the co-founder recognized that she was conveying her own perception of the situation and that she had the authority to grant or deny access to the participants. She acknowledged her role in the process and in addition to sharing the research information internally, she also volunteered to be interviewed herself.

One of the organizations in Northern England, expressed concern about interviewing young people. They felt that the young people have already faced

difficult experiences with Home Office appointments, and participation in the research would not be appropriate for them. This aligns with the idea that gatekeepers often feel a responsibility to protect children or young people from potential adverse effects of participating in research. As a result, gatekeepers can unintentionally create barriers to participation if they believe young people should not participate even if they may wish to do so (Butler and Williamson, 1994; Thomas and O’Kane, 1998). In this case, the staff at the organization articulated their own concerns and judgment on the matter. It is important to acknowledge that making these decisions can be challenging, especially when individuals feel they are acting out of a sense of protectiveness for the children and young people under their care. Richards et al., (2015) state that certain positions in research with children and young people prioritize the principle of protection over participation, which risks denying them their right to take part in research. It is therefore difficult to determine how young people themselves might have responded to the opportunity to participate, as they were not given the chance to express their views. This was duly considered when setting up the research design and applying for ethical approval.

Clark (2010) makes a vital point about pre-existing positive relationships between participants and gatekeepers, which researchers can use or even exploit, to gain social access to the target population. This provides an interesting insight into my own research participants. The young people who

agreed to be interviewed were referred by individuals with whom they had a positive relationship, for instance, former Foster Carer, ESOL teacher or their social worker. This naturally raises the question of whether a young person participated because they genuinely wanted to or because they did not want to say no and risk disappointing the person who shared the research information with them. Alternatively, they may have felt they could trust me as the interviewer because I was known to their gatekeeper in a professional capacity. It is also possible that their decision to participate was influenced by a combination of trust in the gatekeeper and a genuine interest in sharing their experience of seeking asylum in the UK. Throughout all communication with gatekeepers, it was emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary and dependent solely on the young person's willingness to take part.

Since I did not have direct access to the target population, it is important to highlight the valuable role that gatekeepers play in research. They can provide efficient routes to participation that might otherwise be difficult to access (Clark, 2010). However, Clark (2010) also emphasizes that gatekeepers have their own priorities, aims and interests, which may influence whether they facilitate or block access to participants. The recruitment process has been challenging. Given the number of young people who participated, the effort required to contact, communicate, discuss the research, address concerns and provide details about my background and experience may not seem

proportionate to the final number of participants. However, this process provided real insight into the need for flexibility and patience in research and the uncertainty of outcomes. I believe I made significant efforts to engage with staff, relay all relevant information, and explore a wide range of avenues to share the research with young people. Working with gatekeepers is complex, as a researcher remains unaware of what occurs after their initial communication. Additionally, gatekeepers have their own priorities, which may shape their level of engagement. I genuinely appreciate efforts made by some individuals to support my research. My background in Refugee Care helped facilitate positive support from some gatekeepers embedded in the Refugee Sector. When my research was referred by someone they knew and trusted, gatekeepers were more likely to engage with me or assist in sharing the research further.

3.5 Data Analysis Method

3.5.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The data were analysed through Thematic Analysis, a qualitative research method applicable across a range of epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al, 2017). Thematic Analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, ‘‘Thematic Analysis is primarily a descriptive strategy that facilitates the search for patterns of experience within a qualitative

data set; the product of a thematic analysis is a description of those patterns and the overarching design that unites them'' (Ayres, 2008, p.867). When conducting Thematic Analysis, a single interview may contain multiple themes, depending on the scope of the research question and the specificity of the interview (Gubrium et al, 2012).

This method is now referred to as Reflexive Thematic Analysis, acknowledging the researchers role at the heart of knowledge production (Braun & Clark, 2019). The authors state that research is never free from researcher influence; their choices shape the knowledge that is created. Through reflexivity, researchers can critically reflect on their values, assumptions, expectations and choices throughout the research process (Braun et al.,2022).

The rationale for choosing Reflexive Thematic Analysis was its flexibility in providing rich, detailed, yet complex data (Braun & Clark, 2006) and illustrating patterns of experience (Ayres, 2008). It is considered useful for examining different participants' perspectives, highlighting similarities and difference, and generating unanticipated insights (Braun & Clark, 2006; King, 2004), which is relevant to the research question. Furthermore, it is effective in summarizing key elements from a large data set (King, 2004).

Thematic Analysis was chosen over other methods such as grounded theory, which involves deriving an abstract theory grounded in participant' views but

typically requires multiple stages of data collection (Charmaz, 2006) or data collection during two separate phases of a project – the beginning and the end (Alhojailan, 2012). The aim of this study was to understand participants' experiences, situate these within existing literature, and contribute to a gap or under researched area. Additionally, the data collection stage was limited to one interview.

Another method that was not selected was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which would have been more suitable for conducting in depth interviews with fewer participants. However, Thematic Analysis allowed for contextualizing data and obtaining a broader perspective on the topic and population (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023). Thematic Analysis was also particularly relevant due to the inclusion of secondary population participant data, which provided further insights into the broader topic.

Further advantages of Thematic Analysis include its accessibility as a method of analysis, making it easy to grasp and quick to learn (Braun & Clark, 2006). The flexibility allows it to be applied in both inductive and deductive methodologies (Frith & Gleeson 2004; Hayes, 1997, as cited in Alhojailan, 2012), meaning it can be used to analyse data ranging from more specific content to broader generalizations and theories.

Thinking about Themes

Themes are inferential and fluid in nature, making them particularly suited for interpretative qualitative inquiry (Van Manen, 1990). Themes may be either evident or hidden (i.e., underlying the text) and can be found through the analysis of metaphors or studying what is implied. In this research, themes also serve as an efficient way to bridge the literature review and the interview data. Furthermore, one particularly useful insight is that, at first glance, topics or interview questions may seem tempting to analyse as they are. However, Braun and Clarke (2013) caution that using the main interview questions as themes is a common pitfall, as it suggests that the data has been summarized rather than thoroughly analyzed. A strong thematic analysis goes beyond summarization, it interprets the data and derives meaning from it (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

I will now examine the stages of thematic analysis used in preparing and analyzing the data for this research.

3.5.2 Stages of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded on zoom, the recording tool, generated a transcript. I compared the transcripts to the interview audio to verify accuracy, identifying instances where words were misquoted or omitted. The following stages of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006,

2021) were then applied to the data to develop analytic insights and construct a meaningful and compelling narrative that addresses the research questions (Braun et al.,2022) :

1. **Familiarization of the data** – The first stage of the process included reading, re-reading and becoming deeply familiar with the data while critically and reflexively engaging with it, as the self is a fundamental part of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Devine, 2021). As recommended by Braun and Clark (2021), I took time to engage with the material once after the interview and again during the analysis period. I remained curious, posing questions to myself to facilitate deeper thinking and engagement.

2. **Generating codes:** After reviewing the data closely, I highlighted segments that were interesting, caught my attention or appeared relevant to the research question. Devine (2021) describes this process as the researcher ‘mining for ideas and patterns’. I remained attuned to my own position throughout this process, which helped me to stay engaged with the data. To prevent the risk of becoming overwhelmed by excessive information or overlooking valuable insights, I conducted two rounds of coding and reviewed the data in a different order, as recommended (Braun & Clark, 2021; Devine, 2021).

3. **Generating initial themes:** In this step, similar codes were clustered together to create initial themes, which can be understood as ‘a pattern of shared meaning organized around a central concept’ (Braun & Clark, 2021, p. 78). This was a thoughtful and deliberate process aimed at developing meaningful and relevant themes in relation to the research question. I took care not to rush the process of theme creation and engaged as deeply as possible with the codes.

4. **Developing and reviewing themes:** Building on the previous step, themes were reviewed, adjusted and strengthened in relation to the codes. Key considerations in this stage included defining the boundaries of each theme, ensuring there was enough meaningful data to support it, and assessing the richness and robustness of the theme (Braun & Clark, 2021).

5. **Refining, defining and naming themes:** After further refinement, a short description or abstract was created for each theme, explaining its fundamental core and uniqueness. The themes were then given names, following Braun and Clarke’s (2021) recommendation that theme names should be ‘informative, concise and catchy’ (p.111). I also ensured that theme names conveyed both richness as well as effectiveness.

6. **Writing the report:** The final step of the analysis involved “coherently weaving together the data extracts and the researcher’s analytic commentary, to tell the story of each theme” (Braun et al., 2022, p.28). In writing the report, I aimed to engage the reader with an interesting narrative that emerged from the data to address the research question. I sought to present participants’ views within the themes to establish robustness and validity. I ensured that extracts were included from across the data set, rather than relying on a single participant, incorporating a range of quotations and using rich, clear extracts, as recommended for Reflexive Thematic Analysis process (Braun & Clarke 2021). As an integral part of the analytic process, my role involved interpreting the data effectively and convincingly (Devine, 2021). Using Braun and Clarke’s (2021) ‘making an argument model’ (p.120), I contextualized this research to provide a rich and compelling representation of the experiences of unaccompanied minors and young people.

The coding and then theme generation took place over data sets, and not through one interview at a time. Here is a glimpse into the process –

Table 7 – Coding and Generating Themes

Raw Data	Generated codes	Subtheme	Theme
<p>They are so nice, they are kind.</p> <p>They talk to me, they ask me if I need anything.</p> <p>They help me more and more and more thing they do for me.</p> <p>Yeah, I'm happy with them</p>	<p>Emotional support by carers, feeling valued, found family in carers</p>	<p>Quality of care and support provided by carers</p>	<p>The role of support systems</p>
<p>Yeah, it's my Baptiste church.</p> <p>My church. I start Monday. Then the kids, we play with them. we do coloring, the face</p>	<p>Excited at volunteering opportunities, facilitating activities, working with kids at the church</p>	<p>Supporting others: agency in action</p>	<p>The role of support systems</p>

3.6 Credibility, Trustworthiness and Dependability in Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity are used to assess the quality of a study, rather than traditional validity measures applied in quantitative research (Yilmaz, 2013). These concepts help determine the accuracy and reliability of findings not only for the researcher but also for participants and readers (Creswell & Miller, 2000, as cited in Yilmaz, 2013).

Additionally, dependability, which corresponds to reliability in quantitative research, ensures that the study process remains consistent and could be replicated across different researchers, time periods, and methods (Gibbs, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited in Yilmaz, 2013). Lincoln and Guba (1985) further introduce transferability (the extent to which findings can be applied to similar settings) and confirmability (ensuring that findings are grounded in the data, with logical and clear inferences).

In this study, establishing credibility and trustworthiness was particularly important due to the nature of exploring experiences among young people and the professionals working with them. To enhance credibility, I engaged in prolonged engagement with the data, ensuring that participants' experiences were accurately reflected and not misinterpreted. Additionally, peer debriefing and supervisory discussions helped verify the consistency of coding and thematic analysis. To enhance transferability, I have provided detailed descriptions of the research context, participant demographics, and

methodological approach, allowing readers to assess whether the findings are applicable to other settings involving asylum-seeking young people (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

University Ethical Guidelines

The research adheres to The University of Essex's ethical guidelines. A thorough ethics review and formal ethical approval have been conducted by the University Ethics Committee to ensure that this research study is based on sound principles, conducted with integrity and to contribute to the field of Refugee Care. The Ethical approval confirmations are listed in Appendices H and I.

In their review, the Ethics Committee ensured that ethical standards of practice and research were maintained and the rights, dignity and welfare of both participants and I, the researcher are protected. All participants and researchers have the right to expect protection from physical, psychological, social, legal and economic harm at all times during the investigation. A risk assessment was included as part of the ethical approval process.

During the course of the research degree, two ethical applications were made to the university, the second following the expiration of the first. This was done to ensure that all avenues in the recruitment process were considered and that

sufficient effort was made to collect data and achieve a broad representation of the population being studied.

The ERAMS training on ‘Research Involving Human Participants’ is a valuable university resource for conducting qualitative research with participants. It provides essential knowledge of safeguarding and ensuring the best interests of participants while keeping the researcher grounded in best practice.

Some key learning points from the training which were applied in this study with both sets of participants include:

- Research participation should be entirely voluntary
- The benefits of research should outweigh the risks
- Benefits and risks should be fairly distributed. For example, research conducted with a vulnerable population should directly benefit that population. In the context of this research study, this meant ensuring young people’s agency in the research process and to consider what they gain from sharing their experience.
- The importance of informed consent
- Key considerations when recruiting participants for research.
- Using data only for the approved research topic

Ethical Considerations in Research

Ethics should be a consideration throughout the research project and not just during the planning stages (Mann, 2016). This is a key focus point and should be kept in mind throughout the thinking, writing and interviewing stages.

Maintaining ethical awareness reflects a commitment to ethical practice, ensuring the project is conducted responsibly.

Drawing on the works of Lichtman (2012), King and Horrocks (2010), and Guillemin and Heggen (2012), Mann (2016) consolidated key ethical considerations for conducting interviews with participants. The following points outline how these considerations were implemented in this research.

- **Avoid Harm** : Lichtman (2012) describes this as the cornerstone of ethical conduct. Careful attention was given to ensuring that the research process and interviews did not cause any adverse effects on participants. Voluntary participation was reinforced, and participants' welfare was prioritised throughout the study. The most crucial aspect was ensuring participants did not feel harmed or negatively impacted in any way by their participation.
- **Informed Consent** : Participants were provided with all necessary information about the research to enable them to make an informed decision about whether they wished to participate and what their

participation would entail. Oral and written consent were obtained, and participants were informed that they could withdraw their consent after the interview if they wished to have their data excluded from the study.

- **Ensuring privacy, anonymity and confidentiality** : Participants were assured their information would be anonymised and kept confidential. They were also given the option to choose their own pseudonyms. While most of the young people stated that they did not mind their real names being used, they were reassured that their names would not be included and their identities would remain unidentifiable within the data.
- **Avoiding Intrusiveness** – While data was collected to inform the research and understand participant's experiences, it was essential that this approach and line of questioning were not perceived as intrusive. Participants were encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable disclosing.
- **Trust, rapport & friendship** – As the researcher, I took responsibility for creating a trustworthy and non-judgmental atmosphere to build rapport with participants, ensuring they felt comfortable during the interview process.
- **Data analysis and interpretation** : As the researcher, I aimed to analyse and interpret the collected data to the best of my ability, providing evidence for research while allowing for readers to assess the robustness or credibility of the results.

- **Data ownership** : As part of informed consent process, participants were informed that they could access the thesis upon its completed if they wished.

With respect to reimbursements, the young people were offered a £10 gift voucher as a gesture of appreciation for their time. This was not intended to be coercive but rather to ensure they felt that their time was valued and respected. This amount was self-funded and the approval for it was sought in the ethical application. One young person requested that I give their voucher to someone in need. I appreciated this sentiment and encouraged them to share their voucher with whomever they saw fit.

During the interview process, safeguarding and the avoidance of retraumatisation were prioritised, particularly given the vulnerability of the young participants. The welfare of participants was kept at the forefront of the research design and interview practice. Participants were clearly informed that they were under no obligation to share anything they did not feel comfortable disclosing, and the interviews were conducted in a manner that respected their emotional boundaries at all times.

In anticipation of potential safeguarding concerns, clear referral pathways were established prior to data collection. If any concerns regarding participants' mental health or wellbeing had arisen during or after the interviews, appropriate referrals to specialist organisations and mental health professionals would have

been prioritised. A range of support services offering mental health and psychosocial support to young people were identified in advance, including the Samaritans, the Refugee Council, Freedom from Torture, and the Helen Bamber Foundation. Participants were also provided with information about these resources where appropriate.

These measures were designed to ensure that participation in the research was as safe and supportive as possible, and that any risk of harm or retraumatisation was mitigated through a clear safeguarding framework. In addition to these safeguarding preparations, careful attention was given during interviews to maintaining clear boundaries and monitoring participants' wellbeing in real time.

Boundaries were an important aspect to consider, ensuring that my role as a researcher was clear to participants. I aimed to provide utmost clarity regarding the research process and the scope of our interaction to manage expectations, ensuring that all communication was transparent and honest. Attention was given to being attuned to participants' feelings and demeanour to assess their reactions during the interview process. If an interview was deemed to have adverse effects, the priority was to stop it. No interviews were ended abruptly; care was taken to ensure that participants left the meeting feeling settled and not vulnerable. In the event of any safeguarding concerns, due procedure would have been followed and relevant organisations or helplines would have been signposted to provide additional support. Fortunately, no such need arose.

Ethical Considerations with UASC and Young People in this Research

Ethical research with refugee populations, particularly unaccompanied minors, requires multilayered and ongoing attention to participant welfare (Vervliet et al., 2015). In this study, the wellbeing of participants was prioritised at all stages to ensure that no harm was caused. To minimise potential distress and complexity, only young people who had already received a positive asylum decision were invited to participate, reassuring them that the research was independent of the Home Office and would not affect their status or services.

Participation was further limited to individuals aged 18 and over to ensure that consent could be given independently and to streamline ethical approval processes. Involving minors would have required guardian consent, raising concerns about influence and autonomy. This approach aimed to prioritise young people's agency in participation while navigating procedural requirements, recognising the broader challenge identified by Richards et al. (2015) that research with young people is often restricted by institutional constraints. Nevertheless, this study sought to expand opportunities for young people's voices to be included, despite the limitations imposed by procedural structures.

In addition to procedural compliance, relational ethics were central to the research approach, emphasising mutual respect, dignity, and attentiveness to participants' emotional wellbeing throughout the interviews (Ellis, 2007, as cited in Vervliet et al., 2015).

Ethical Considerations with Secondary Participants

As established at the beginning of the ethics section, ethical considerations were carefully maintained for both sets of participants. Ethical procedures for secondary participants, who were professionals working with young refugees and asylum seekers, also followed established ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and participants were made fully aware that their involvement was voluntary, confidential, and independent of their organisations. Care was taken to ensure that interviews provided a safe and respectful space for reflection, particularly given the potential emotional impact of discussing difficult or distressing professional experiences. Participants were reminded that they could pause or withdraw from the research at any time without consequence. For instance, one participant, after sharing a particular part of their experience, requested that this example not be included in the research. This was duly noted and respected, demonstrating the prioritisation of participants' views, and agency within the research process.

3.8 Reflexivity

It is essential to consider the role of reflexivity and reflective practice, as well as their implications for qualitative research. Reflection is the process of pondering and analysing an experience, while reflective practice involves learning from experience. Reflexivity, on the other hand, refers to the process of critical self-reflection on one's biases and recognizes that the researcher is part of the setting and context they seek to understand. It also involves critically examining the entire research process (Schwandt, 2015). Reflexivity encourages researchers to engage in continuous reflection throughout the research process, enabling them to identify, critique, and articulate their positionality and how 'reflexivity informs positionality' (Holmes, 2020, p. 2). This highlights the idea that personal values and ethics influence the research process. Rowe (2014, as cited in Holmes, 2020) further emphasizes that reflexivity and researchers' positionality are not fixed but rather evolve over time and are shaped by contextual factors.

Throughout the research process, I documented my reflections, particularly after conducting interviews, and kept them confidential. This self-expression allowed me to process the experience and facilitated the emergence of new insights. I reflected on the interaction itself, logistical arrangements, participants'

responses before the interview, any possible anxieties I detected, and what these might signify.

In one instance, an ESOL teacher informed me that a young person was interested in participating but was wary of discussing his past. I coordinated with her and her colleague to provide the young person with relevant information about the research, emphasizing that it focused on their time in the UK and that they should only share what they felt comfortable with. This reassurance helped ease the young person's concerns before the interview and our first interaction. Reflecting on this, I considered how different young people process information about research and the importance of ongoing communication in recruitment and informed consent.

Another significant moment occurred when I met a young person online for an interview at their preferred time and day. They were sitting in their car, which, while private, made me wonder whether the interview was scheduled between travel, whether it would feel rushed, and how this might impact the nature of the information shared. Only during the course of the interview and upon later reflection did I realize that this was the only private space available to the young person, as he was living at a friend's house and had no accommodation of his own at the time. This realization was valuable in prompting me to check my assumptions.

Reflecting on the interviews, one can consider how power dynamics may influence research involving young people. According to El Gemayel and Salema (2023), negotiating power dynamics requires relational awareness, agency, and co-reflexivity, which is a process where children and young people critically reflect on the assumptions brought into research by both researchers and participants. It also involves paying attention to how participants engage in the research process, as well as how data is collected, analysed, and interpreted (Moore et al., 2016, as cited in El Gemayel & Salema, 2023). Furthermore, the authors emphasize the importance of maintaining continuous awareness, assessment, and reassessment throughout the research process.

As mentioned earlier, the thinking and preparation process begins before the interview and continues throughout the entire research process. I remained consistently mindful of the young person's engagement, any potential concerns, and the need for clarity. I prioritized their comfort and willingness, repeatedly emphasizing that they should share only what they felt comfortable sharing, ensuring there was no pressure or expectation. Consent was treated as an ongoing process, rather than a one-time agreement. This included checking what they are comfortable discussing, and whether they felt okay to continue. I acknowledge that, as the researcher, I may have been perceived as holding more power in the research dynamic. Kim (2024) highlights the complexity of interviews emphasizing that they can serve as spaces where interviewees and interviewers negotiate power imbalances and diverse positionalities. Their

research also notes the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by researchers, as well as the efforts made to mitigate power dynamics in relation to gender, race and immigrant status. Kostet (2023) suggests that power dynamics can shift when interviewing children, particularly when considering the researcher's minority ethnic background. While I recognize my own minority ethnic background in the UK context, I was interviewing young people from diverse backgrounds, all of whom were also from minority ethnic communities. This positioning led me to reflect on how, despite facilitating the interviews and maintaining its framework, the young person played a central role in shaping the interaction.

In one particular interview, a young person delved deeply into the experience of their journey to the UK. At one point, they asked me how much they should share, to which I responded that they should share as much or as little as they felt comfortable with, including whatever aspects of their experience, they wished to include in the research. When I attempted to shift the focus to his time in the UK, the young person responded that he was almost done discussing this aspect of his experience. It became clear that he wanted to communicate the details of his journey, as a way to express the challenges he had faced. At one stage, when we both became aware of the time, I asked if he would prefer to take a break or continue the next day. He chose to continue, asserting his agency in the interview process. In many ways, I felt that the young person was

directing the conversation on his terms, reinforcing the idea that interviews can be spaces where young people can exercise their agency. McGarry (2015) questioned the perspective that young people need to be empowered by adults, instead arguing that they actively construct and negotiate their own biographies as agents. The author recommended a flexible and open research approach that allows for a deeper understanding of the complex experiences of children and young people.

My visible and invisible identity markers may have influenced young people's engagement during the interviews. One young person, upon noticing my hijab during our online meeting, greeted me with "Salaam" (a common greeting among Muslims, though not always be exclusive to these contexts). In professional and academic spaces, there is often caution regarding how much of ourselves we disclose. However, in this research context, authentic engagement felt crucial, particularly given that the young people were voluntarily sharing their personal stories. They deserved a genuine and humane interaction with the person interviewing them. Pincock and Jones (2020) highlight the importance of flexibility, reflexivity, and the enjoyability of research in helping adolescents feel at ease, enabling and encouraging them to contribute their voices to the study while also feeling empowered by it. While I listened and asked questions during the interviews, I also responded appropriately to their moments of joy and challenge as they unfolded.

While I was able to maintain a relational, approachable, and comfortable research interview, I also upheld clear boundaries by explicitly defining the nature of our interaction and my role. Berger (2013) states that the researcher's degree of personal familiarity with participants' experiences impacts all phases of the research process. Although I was not an insider to their experiences, my prior work with unaccompanied young people provided me with some familiarity with the asylum-seeking and refugee process in the UK. This background helped me adopt a flexible yet dedicated approach to the research process. Any emotional impact from the interviews was reflected upon, with the priority being to foster an authentic encounter and gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, recognizing that they are the experts of their own lives. Regarding the secondary population, my curiosity about their experiences in their work remained at the forefront. This helped mitigate any potential feelings of judgment regarding their professional roles or experiences in the field.

Engaging in a reflexive approach helps reduce bias (Rowe, 2014) and enhances self-awareness regarding my influence on various aspects of the research. As I bring my own lens and contextual background into the study, this inevitably shapes the research process, for instance, in the themes I identified within the data. Holmes (2020) argues that, despite reflexivity, researchers inherently bring some degree of bias and subjectivity to their work. To mitigate this, I clarified

any ambiguous data with participants during interviews to ensure that their experiences were accurately represented. In my research, I used peer discussion and supervisor feedback as a form of investigator triangulation to help strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. I shared anonymised sections of selected transcripts, as well as summaries of the emerging findings, with another PhD researcher to gain external input on the codes and themes. This process helped me critically reflect on the relevance and meaning of the data, making sure that important elements were not missed and that my interpretations were not overly shaped by my own assumptions. Similarly, feedback from my supervisor played an important role in encouraging me to think carefully about how well the themes captured the data, and how grounded the analysis remained in participants' voices. Together, these steps introduced different perspectives at key points in the analysis and helped make the overall process more rigorous and reflective.

Reflexivity was central to ensuring confirmability, as I continuously examined my positionality as a researcher, acknowledging how my background may have influenced data interpretation. I have documented key decision-making processes throughout the study, ensuring that the findings were clearly linked to participant narratives rather than shaped by my assumptions. Furthermore, I have included direct participant quotes to allow readers to engage with the data

transparently, ensuring that the interpretations remained grounded in the voices of the young people and professionals themselves (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Through these strategies, I aimed to conduct an ethically sound study, ensuring that the research process remained consistent, transparent, and reflective of participants' lived experiences.

Reflexivity was also crucial during data interpretation, as I prioritized centring participants' voices, their perceptions of their experiences, and the impact they felt as a result. I observed that working in the refugee sector can sometimes lead to a greater focus on challenges, rather than recognizing other aspects of individual experiences. However, the data allowed for a more nuanced and balanced perspective to emerge.

In this research, I have used a first-person reflexive voice to report the process and findings, as this approach allowed me to articulate my experiences and biases while positioning myself more transparently within the research.

3.8.1 Researchers' Positionality

This section presents my background and the perspectives I bring to the research. Holmes (2020) defines positionality as "Both an individual's worldview and the position they adopt regarding a research task and its social and political context" (p.1). A researcher's positionality encompasses aspects

such as gender, ethnicity, professional background, and lived experiences, all of which influence how they engage with participants, interpret data, and construct meaning within the research process. As Piantanida and Garmin (2009, as cited in Lukenchuk, 2017) argue, the researcher's self becomes an instrument of inquiry, making it essential to acknowledge and critically engage with one's position in the research. Explicating a researcher's positionality requires reflexivity, which serves as a validation tool for qualitative research. Doctoral students in particular are encouraged to examine their positions for greater self-awareness and embrace self-disclosure (Lukenchuk, 2017).

My therapeutic background enabled me to approach questions with sensitivity, ensuring they were open-ended to allow participants to share their experiences in their own way and articulate the meaning they ascribe to them. The well-being of the participants remained a priority, as I remained mindful of their comfort levels and carefully facilitated discussions in a manner that respected their boundaries. A genuine interest in understanding participants' experiences helped ensure that their voices remained at the centre of the research, rather than being overshadowed by my own positionality.

The year 2015 was widely regarded as Europe's "Refugee Crisis" (UNHCR, 2015), with images and videos flooding social media, depicting hundreds of people drowning, boats capsizing, and the desperation of people seeking safety.

The image of the Syrian child, Aylan Kurdi, lying face-down on the beach remains unforgettable (The Guardian, 2015). While I find the term ‘Refugee Crisis’ problematic, as it requires further consideration as a politically constructed crisis, this period had a profound impact on shaping my personal and professional trajectory. The media coverage exposed the precariousness of forced displacement, prompting me to reflect on my role in supporting displaced communities.

At the time, I was a young adult, reflecting on my interests and future. I was in the second year of a Master’s in Psychology degree, deeply introspective about my role in the world. The idea of being displaced and not feeling safe in one’s own home was difficult to comprehend, and I was eager to learn more about the world and people’s lived experiences. It was during this time that I realized the need for my professional work to align more closely with my personal values, incorporating a community, humanitarian, and advocacy-based approach.

While many experiences could have influenced my life trajectory, two key professional experiences shaped my journey toward this research. In India, I worked for three years as a psychologist with children and young people, engaging in both individual and group therapeutic work. This experience was deeply meaningful and intellectually stimulating and allowed me to develop creativity and flexibility in working with younger people. Later, when I began the Refugee Care Course at the University, I started a placement with an

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) and Young People team at a charity, offering psychosocial and therapeutic support. With my previous background of working with young people, and my first interactions in refugee work in the UK being with UASCs, I became increasingly invested in understanding this group further. My data collection began after my placement ended, during a period when I was working with another team in the East of England with children and young people in families. While I was no longer working specifically with UASCs, I remained embedded in the refugee sector, which allowed me to network with colleagues and organizations about my research. My move to the UK from India gave me a personal understanding of immigration, living alone, and navigating physical distance from family. Initially, I felt like an outsider, both professionally and academically, as I tried to navigate how things operated. However, the course and placement provided me with time and stability to become familiar with the refugee sector and encouraged me to pursue this research. Lokot (2019) notes that our education, prior work experience, race, age, gender and economic status influences the way we think about the communities we serve and the way we do research.

This research is also informed by my specific identity markers as a hijabi Muslim woman from India, which may have influenced how participants interacted with me. For instance, with young people, this identity could have facilitated a sense of ease in their self-expression. However, for some, it may

have created hesitation in sharing certain aspects of their experience with someone of the same religious faith. Similarly, with the professionals, all of whom were white women, this dynamic may have shaped what they chose to share or how they interacted with me. It is interesting to consider how this positionality may have placed me as an insider in some cases and an outsider in others. Regardless of these dynamics, all the interviews felt like respectful spaces where participants engaged in meaningful discussions about something important and personal to them. While I recognize that my personal experiences, professional background, and identity shape my research, I remained committed to prioritizing participants' voices and ensuring that the study reflects their lived realities rather than my own assumptions.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 FINDINGS

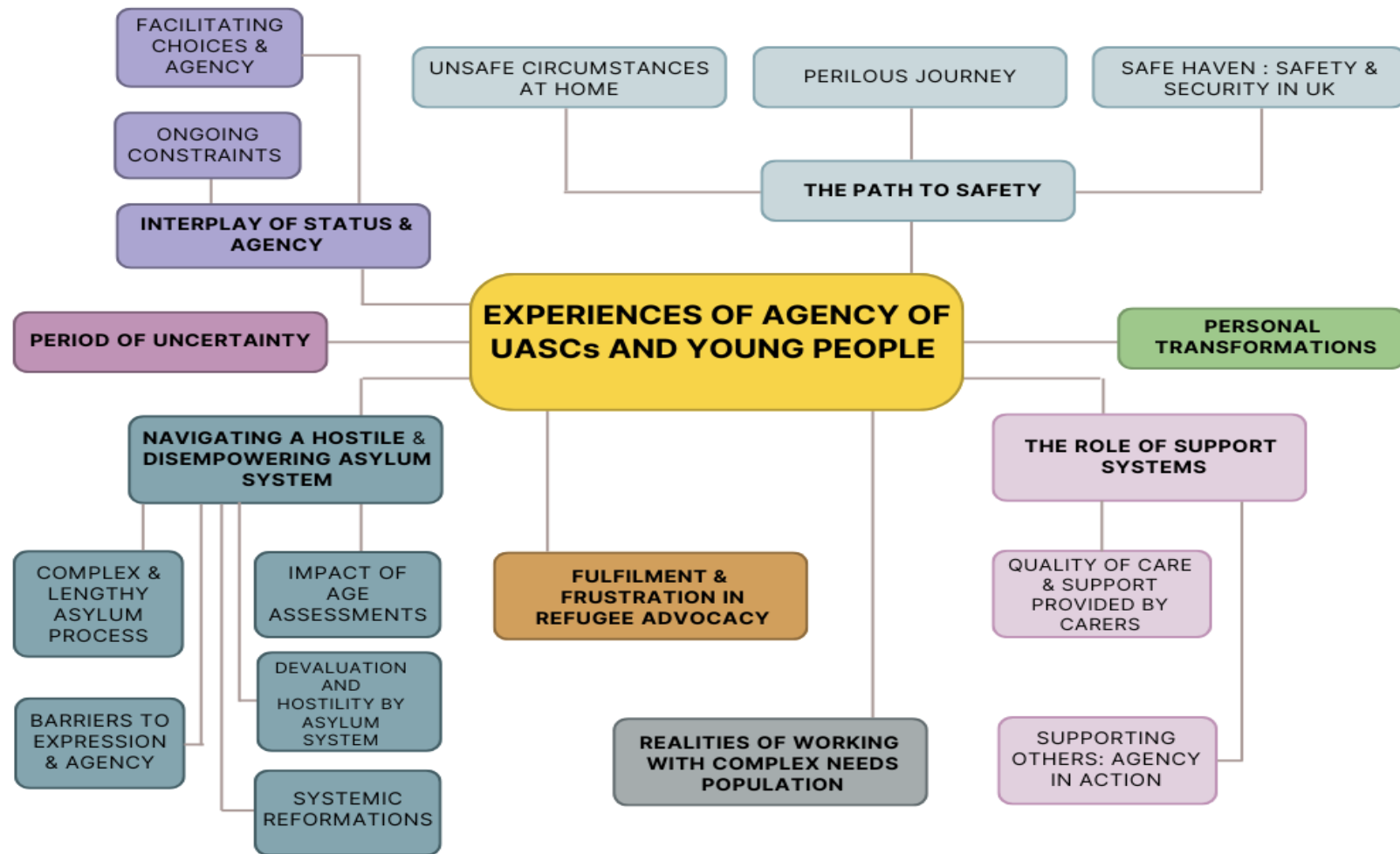


Figure 6 – Thematic map of Findings

4.1.1 Primary Participant (PP) Findings Section

Theme 1 – The Path to Safety

‘Safety’ as an overarching theme emerged through the data set, conveying its value and significance in young people’s experiences. Based on the intricacies of these experiences, this theme is further divided into subthemes to convey the different stages of safety or a lack of safety the young people experienced as minors from their time in their home country till the time of the research interview.

Subtheme 1 – Unsafe Circumstances at Home

Participants contextualized their time in the UK by recounting risks, imminent danger from violence and persecution that led to their departure from their home country.

‘I was caught in problem. They told me to leave. They say you stay here it’s dangerous for you.’ PP1

‘Before, with my religion in my country, it’s not like allowed. I don’t have any freedom like this’ PP3

“ There was quite a lot of ISIS and those things going around in those areas that we live in, in the village. So, we got a couple of letters telling us to leave. One time we even got a grenade something like that inside the house, couple of shoots as well.” PP4

“And Sudan have war, war and a lot of problem.” PP5

“When I was living there with my family in village, lots of time fights like between the Taliban and the governments [foreign] and situation was very bad. Like the Taliban didn't want to leave the children for school at that moment... So, when the Taliban knows about the situation, they work with governments so they send letters to our homes... They give us warning like they said we kill all your family if you work with them or lots of things.” PP6

All of the participants expressed that it was their family's decision that they left and not their own highlighting limited agency in these situations.

For instance, PP4 expressing he couldn't decline his father's request and that he had made the plan of how he would leave the country.

‘Then my father decided to because I was, uh, my oldest brother, the one older than me. He didn’t want to leave them. I was like 15 years old so my father told me to go and I couldn’t reject.’ PP4

However, more complex and nuanced opinions were also expressed by participants:

‘It was my family’s decision and some of it was mine. So, when my family offered me and I accepted because the situation in my country wasn’t right. Yeah, and they offered me and I accepted and I said yes so, the rest was my decision.’ PP2

PP2 expressed ownership of the decision and that she participated in the decision making and that ultimately it was not just a decision taken for her by her family.

‘That decision was made for me. I didn’t know where I was going... on the way of coming and leaving Afghanistan, that was not my decision. Probably, if it was up to me, I would have stayed there. I don’t know. It wasn’t all my decision.’ PP7

PP7 expressed that while this was not his own decision, had it been his decision in retrospect, he might have chosen differently.

Subtheme 2 – Perilous Journey

All participants recounted the arduous and harrowing journeys they undertook to reach the UK. For many, the journey was shrouded in uncertainty, as they travelled under the guidance of smugglers or agents arranged by their families, often without knowing their final destination. Some participants described these journeys as "illegal", not designated as a legal route for arriving in UK for asylum and further reflecting on the clandestine nature of their travel.

The narratives vividly conveyed the horrific conditions they endured, including prolonged periods without basic necessities such as food and water, exposure to violence and abuse at the hands of smugglers, and the relentless physical, mental, and emotional toll this had. One participant also heard from the young girls traveling with their family that they were sexually assaulted.

The participants described varying durations of their journeys, which ranged from two months to one year. These journeys involved multiple border crossings, temporary stays in different countries, constant movement from one location to another, walking for days, and enduring unsafe and unsanitary living conditions.

For instance, PP6's excerpt notes the varied challenges faced on the journey as lack of essentials, difficult living conditions, the difficulty of walking long hours and the consequent exhaustion-

‘Without food, without drink, water and the weather was very high like in 40 more than 42 43 degree. With children and everyone was there. The smuggler of Iran were very dangerous because they everyone hitting too badly like by back kicking. Everyone’s feet was like injury. No one could walk. Their shoes, I saw mine as well, everyone was the same. Their feet was injury. Everyone’s hand feets were like injury.’ PP6

Participants’ experiences highlighted the intersectionality of age and gender, emphasizing the particularly challenging nature of the journey for those who were young, unaccompanied, and female:

‘Obviously at a young age if you leave your country, there is obviously many struggles especially in Turkey. So there was, how is it called, different people would be there, and then different nationalities and you don’t know them but you live in the same house. So, it wasn’t comfortable obviously. I mean you don’t know it’s like people from the same place you know what they may face but unless you don’t know. So obviously what may happen to me I don’t know. Because if anything happens, you won’t be able to report them to the police or anything but you still live in the same house and just trust each other.’ PP2

PP2 brought forth the point of challenges while travelling young, having to live with strangers and at the same time, having no choice but to trust them as you are sharing an accommodation with them.

‘It’s difficult because no one to help you. Even giving asylum to this country, you know you are child. No one to help you no one or this one is better for you or do this one... From other country then other country, you’re afraid for everything. No one to trust each other. Yeah, it’s so difficult. When I remember that all its so painful. Like for the girls, you don’t have money you’re hungry. Even the people like they are smoking, they use the drugs. When I live in the jungle like that. When I see them, I’m so afraid what will happen when I sleep. I don’t want to imagine for what they would do to me in Libya. So, I’m afraid for everything. So, I’m always crying, crying and say please God help me.’ PP3

PP3’s excerpt highlights her painful reality of navigating the journey alone, constantly afraid for her safety while she sleeps, worried about the kind of people around her with no one trustworthy to support her.

What also emerged from a couple of participants was the connections and friendships that young people made on the long journeys that served as support during this otherwise challenging time.

‘I come with two friends. But I don’t know them. I just met them on the way you know. Yeah, you know they from Sudan so we speak together Sudanese yeah.’

PP1

‘No, I didn’t know any of them from before. We met in that game, we try to pass the border. But they were in my own country, the same language, so that’s why help with each other.’ PP6

There was also the perspective that despite continued challenges on the journey, there was a determination to reach the UK, and in fact, it was the hope that kept the participant going.

‘I was very scared but the thing was my goal was to reach there. I have to come here. Turkey was not my place ... so when everyone coming here, they coming with a big hope.’ PP6

Subtheme 3 – Safe Haven: Safety and Security in the UK

Reflecting on their time in the UK on their arrival, all participants expressed a sense of safety and security they felt after their experiences in the home country as well as on the journey. This underlying foundation of feeling safe was

associated to feeling reassured, to be able to engage in other activities and an expanded sense of agency and an overall impact on their wellbeing.

‘ ‘You know here I can study, can have nice life. I feel safe here you know.

Yeah. I can study I can feel safe. I feel no danger for me. Here, I get people to look after me. If I need help. ‘ ‘ PP1

PP1 conveys his sense of safety from no imminent danger, allowing him to focus on education, to ask for help if needed and consequently have a good quality of life.

‘ ‘Yes, but when I get here I get many questions. That time my Social Worker, her name was Zara, she confirm to me that I was in a safe place now and none of those things that were happening on the way was going to happen to me now. So I knew that that was the place to be.

Yeah, so that time, I felt like I am home, when I get here. I mean they make me feel like and that’s when I start to live with Caroline and everyone, I start to make relationships with them. My classmates, you know like friendships, and in my college, and outside college, people from my country, I start to make friendship with them. It already start to feel better really now. ‘ ‘ PP2

PP2 expressed that she was reassured on her arrival in the UK by her Social Worker that she is safe and she is no longer unsafe as she was on the journey. She also expressed a sense of home and belonging that could be established through this safety and further connections with others.

‘ ‘Yeah, back then, it’s not like this, it’s not good. I don’t have any good life. I don’t have anything for me. Now I have everything for me different. They look after me, I go college. I’m healthy now, I’m happy. I always say, I’m safe now. to be honest, I’m safe now. I do my religion freedom, I go church, I listen my own song, I do everything. Because most of the time people are around for me. They help me. They want to listen to me. And I want to talk and they listen to me. I’m glad. I’m thankful. I hope one time, just thank you for government, NHS, alpha cares, everyone and I say it’s not long that time that I speak to like this. I speak everything like thank you.’ ’ PP3

PP3 reiterated the sense of safety she feels in the UK and the consequent impact of her feeling free: freedom of choice and expression, practicing her faith freely and attending church. PP3 communicated the happiness she feels currently and the gratitude she holds towards the UK authorities.

‘ ‘I mean everything is going well, I’m quite safe here, I feel safe. Everything is going well.’ ’ PP4

Similarly, PP4's experience of feeling safe is connected to his overall experience of how he feels about living in the UK.

Theme 2 – The Period of Uncertainty

A recurrent theme emerging from participants experience was that of 'uncertainty' while seeking asylum during which time the young people endured stress and anxiety. From the descriptions, participants felt overwhelmed, worried and consumed thinking about what the decision of their application would be, and that the process is slow and painful.

“Very difficult. Stressed you know. you stay like you don't know what's going to happen. The interview, like they going to say no, you don't know. You're like stressed all the time. Just think about it. what they going to say....

It's difficult. You just have to wait. I don't know. they make it hard. If they have to take this long time. They done it like quicker. They don't have to wait 2 years you know to get status...

It's hard you know. some people said they take long. Say like just leave and forget it. one day you will hear. Because you think about it all the time, just stress. Forget about it. you just do what you can do. But some people they think about it all the time. .I don't think I have choice. There's no choice. just what

you're allowed to do, what you can't do you can't do. You can't say to your solicitor you just have to wait. All your other choice, you can do you know. ''

PP1

The excerpt from PP1 encapsulates the mental and emotional toll that the long wait for a decision can take. PP1 described himself as being “*depressed*” and shared that he had no choice but to wait. While he acknowledged that there are other things one can do during the waiting period, he emphasized that waiting is non-negotiable, implying the profound impact of uncertainty and how it can overshadow other aspects of everyday life.

‘So, I would say that time, when I wasn't getting like interview or anything, it started to get stressful. When they start to ask you questions and everything, wanting details, you start to remember everything that happened to you on the way. After that, for about a year it was obviously really stressful when I didn't get my documents or anything. And I was thinking will I get accepted or will they deport me. After a year, they told me I could stay in the UK for the next 5 years or so....

Obviously that year the whole time you think like when is it going to come, when are they going to see me now. I mean, obviously because you're new here, that's the only thing you think of. '' PP2

Similarly, PP2 conveyed the consuming nature of the waiting period, fraught with uncertainty, describing it as *“the only thing you can think of,”* which implies a restriction on everyday agency and the ability to fully engage with their environment. The uncertainty can compound the difficult memories and thoughts that are opened up after the interview as indicated by PP2.

PP5 described the waiting period to be difficult and that he slept most of the time. He was not engaged in education or much other activities at this time. This offered an insight that sleep as an activity was marking time for PP5 and that this period reflected a lack of aliveness, non-engagement and passivity.

‘Because before the status, everyone is like feeling like without any documents. Its feeling sad. No one knows what should we do. What’s our life like? Worry about lots of things. Can I get positive or negative status. Or what’s going to be their decision. They give me positive or if they give me negative what’s happen to me? Because there was lots of things. Like lots of stress. Before the status. ‘

PP6

PP6 draws a clear distinction between life before and after receiving his status. Like the other participants already quoted, he was consumed by constant worry about the Home Office's decision, which seemed to determine what his life would be like as a consequence. Significantly, this worry affected what he was

able to do, and what he was not able to do and highlighting its connection to the expression and experience of agency.

‘Oh, long, long obviously, I was told when I had my interview and everything. I said so obviously I had to go a few times to my lawyer to get that interview done. Dig out every single information, every single bit for me. They said the Home Office will make a decision after 6 months. And I was like, All right, that's fine. And then that 6 months went, and I mean, it was quite a hard time that 6 months was that when no decision came, was like, oh, I was. What happened? I asked this. What's happening? She said to me. Our home office is quite slow. Sometimes it might take a bit longer than we're expecting. I said, alright, that's fine. I thought, why can't they make a decision. But obviously it's a lot of work for them as well, cause there's a lot of people. Maybe they a bit unorganized or something like that’’ PP7

PP7 believed he would get a decision in 6 months’ time to only receive a status 1.5 years later. His experience of this wait indicated a time of confusion and uncertainty. However, the participant rationalised this experience to conclude that the Home Office is dealing with a lot of people and applications and this is merely a result of a disorganized system.

Theme 3 – The Role of Support Systems

The role of support systems emerged as a crucial theme, illustrating how relationships with carers, peers, and broader networks can either enable or constrain the expression and development of agency among young people navigating their new environments. This theme is further explored through two subthemes, outlined below:

Subtheme 1 – Quality of Care and Support provided by Carers

The quality of care and the depth of relationships with carers were significant in shaping the young people's sense of agency. Positive, nurturing relationships with carers fostered a sense of stability and trust, which was essential for young people to feel supported and to engage with their new environments confidently.

PP3 recounted a particularly challenging period when she was hospitalized and unwell, emphasizing the unconditional support provided by her support workers:

“ They are so nice, they are kind. They talk me, they ask me if I need anything. They help me more and more and more thing they do for me. Yeah, I’m happy with them because they are only my family, [K], [C], they are nice. Some days I

shout little bit shout like that with them but they are patient with me. They help me. They do everything good for me. Because no one for me in here and now I have family. [K] [C], they are my family.

They look after me, I know everyone they are for me. When I fell sick, when I sleep in the hospital, it's difficult time for me. I don't want to see anyone. I say I don't want to talk anyone. But they take my responsibility and they bring to me in hospital because I didn't go to any hospital or no one to care for me. I'm die, I'm not life. I don't talk, I just not be with you like this now. So difficult time for me. But everything like they do good. I know they are for me. They help me. I don't have words to them because I'm back to now life. Before I'm not healthy, they do every day check. They do some [participants name], we go hospital. I say no, don't, I don't want to. I don't want speak anyone. I feel I want die like that. But they say no, we are here for you they say to me. Then they give me life. They give me everything. I don't know how to thankful to them.

..... They help me and they bring me back to before [participant's name].'' PP3

PP3 described her support workers as her family, highlighting their patience when she resisted help, struggled to take her medication, or refused to attend appointments. She vividly conveyed the mental and emotional pain she experienced and credited her support workers with “bringing her back to life.” Their dedication profoundly impacted her health and well-being, creating a strong bond between them. Despite feeling hopeless and unable to care for

herself, PP3's sense of agency was facilitated by the consistent care and encouragement of her support workers. Their actions helped her overcome a period of immense struggle, underscoring the critical role of support systems in fostering agency and recovery.

'I will say, whoever came at 15 or 16 years old I will say they can stay with a foster family.... But as an asylum seeker family is the best to be honest. I had some problem with my age, [Foster Carer's name] fixed it for me. I had some problem when I got a refusal for my case, [Foster Carer's name] made a report and wrote a lot of letters. My teacher did that as well and they helped quite a lot with language and everything. I will say whoever is age 15 or 16 just stay with the family and be patient.' PP4

For PP4, living with a foster family played a significant role in the care and support he received during his time seeking asylum. He credited his foster carer for helping to resolve issues he faced throughout the process, as well as for securing supporting documents from his teacher at the time. PP4 even advocated for other unaccompanied minors to live with foster families while waiting for their applications to be processed, emphasizing the importance of their support and encouraging patience to fully benefit from it.

‘Now I have one mentor. And I have personal adviser, they give you lots of personal advice they give you lots of information. And I have before when I was under 18, there was like people who worked for me, like social worker. There was key worker. They just give you all the information and decision what you should do how you live here...

Now if I need any help, my PA, she going to help me with this, and now I have a mentor now, who show me the business, which I decide to start my own business, as a private company. So, this is going to help me with my business.’

PP6

It is evident that PP6 received quality support during his time as a minor seeking asylum, where he was kept informed and helped understand how to go about the day to day in the UK. He continues to feel supported after receiving his status, as he now benefits from mentorship and has a personal adviser to assist with his business endeavours.

For PP7, the care and nurturing provided by the foster carer was deeply touching, and he felt as though she was looking after him like his own mother. She offered to take him to the mosque and to Islamic schooling, supporting him in whatever he needed or wanted to engage in.

‘But [Foster Carer’s name] did everything for me, that if he like, my mom would do for me. She told me that if you need to go to Madrasa I’ll take to

Madrasa as well, and whatever knowledge and school, everything she said to me, if you need anything with help, with it doesn't matter if it's like you're going to the mosque. You going to school. or whatever. I'll help you with that. When she did, to be fair and I was, I was not expecting that from them. I was like, yeah, that was quite interesting fact to me.’’ PP7

Further, the Foster Carer made all the effort to cook food the way the participant liked, and was used to, and this also became an activity and time they spent together sharing:

‘She tried her hardest to cook for me like Afghan food and stuff like that like as in. I can't tell you. She tried like so many like menus and stuff like that. She was like, Yeah, I'm going to cook this and that. We used to cook together to just help mix it and stuff like that, but. Yeah, it was. It was nice. ‘

Subtheme 2– Supporting Others: Agency in Action

For some participants, the support systems extended beyond receiving help to actively contributing by supporting others in similar positions or other caring roles. This act of support highlighted an important dimension of agency, where young people took on roles of leadership, mentorship, and advocacy, demonstrating their ability to influence and shape the experiences of others while affirming their own sense of empowerment and purpose.

Reflecting on his own experience as a newly arrived individual in the UK and the challenges he faced, PP7 expressed empathy for others in a similar position. He wanted to support them in any way he could, whether through translation, offering advice, or simply providing familiarity and comfort as someone from their home country to talk to. This desire to support others highlights the active role PP7 has taken in using his own experiences to empower and assist those navigating similar challenges, demonstrating a clear example of agency in action -

‘When you go somewhere like new, you wouldn't expect Afghan people over there to talk to you and stuff like that. But it does give you a lot of comfort gives you the quite good sort of feeling that that person is from the same country that he's supporting me. He's like if I need something I can talk to him about. And obviously about the language as well, which are like they wouldn't be able to understand English or speak English barely any Afghans I tell them if you need something, just if they're leaving the family, if they're leaving like. So, of any accommodation or something like that. Just tell them, take my number, just give my number to them. Just tell them call [participant's name] I need to talk to you. And then, obviously, if it's about translating, if it's anything sort of school or something like that. if I can help, I'll do my best. and I think that gives them sort of a lot of positive energy and support to them obviously, do you know that someone is here who is trying to help us. and if you need to speak

to someone else. he can translate wherever you need to say cause obviously if you need to say something, and you can't say, or you feel like you, you can't talk, and it's just inside you. Obviously, you wouldn't be able to understand English and its quite difficult. And I went through that. That's why I feel like, yeah, that's why I'm trying to give it other people that I went through that you don't need to go for that. I'm here to try and help you.''

Another participant, PP3 expressed her excitement about the activities she was starting the week the interview took place. These activities included volunteering at the church, where she facilitated activities for children, as well as volunteering with animals in the local park. PP3 discussed the possibility of cleaning or feeding the animals but emphasized that she was open to any kind of task, as long as she could participate in her community and engage with others through care and support. This reflects her agency in actively seeking opportunities for meaningful participation, taking control of her actions, and contributing to her community:

'It's my Baptiste church. My church. I start Monday. Then the kids, we play with them. We do colouring, the face painting like that. Also, on Friday, tomorrow I do volunteer work with animal. Last Friday, I go there and they ask me to come to Friday. If you enjoy it then we look at schedule your college then

we start. I say okay. Then tomorrow, I go. Maybe I start with when the kid come and I give food to the animal. Or clean. But I'm excited. ‘

Theme 4 – The Interplay of Status and Agency

Receiving a positive decision, i.e., having their asylum claim accepted and being granted status—was a remarkable and emotional experience for the participants. The status is closely linked to agency, and this theme is divided into two subthemes to explore the varied and ongoing impacts that the status has had on the participants' lives

Subtheme 1- Facilitating Choices and Agency

A recurring sentiment was that the status facilitated agency through choices and it brought relief, joy and an imagination for future prospects.

‘I think I find it good you know. first thing you're comfortable. I can sleep. I see my friend they all have status and just me like. I find I don't know how I am I have no security, no ID, nothing. Its big difference. Yeah, now you know I can work I can travel study. ‘ PP1

For PP1, the emotional and mental impact of receiving status has been characterized by a sense of comfort and the ability to sleep peacefully. The participant highlights a significant personal difference that the status has facilitated, including the ability to travel, work, and study. While he had been engaged in studies prior to receiving status, the prolonged wait and uncertainty had a negative impact. Now, there appears to be a renewed sense of engagement with his studies. He is also visualizing working for Amazon and thinking about his future.

‘After that year you get a bit relaxed because you know you’re safe and you’re going to live life here and you have access to education and then you’ll be happy obviously.’ PP2

After receiving the status, PP2 is relieved that the sense of safety established in the UK, can remain and will not be taken away. The participant feels they can now continue to envisage a happy life here.

‘So happy, just exciting. I don’t know how to explain my feeling. I just cry’

PP3

For PP3, receiving status brought an emotional relief that she found difficult to articulate. Additionally, a more complex experience emerged, as the participant

expressed a desire to identify as British and to work toward emulating and adopting ‘the British way’:

‘I change every day my language because I don’t want to speak my language. If I speak my language, I forget English because it’s not my first language. I want more listen the English song. I want more whiter movie and watch the movie and listen the word. I read how to speak the accent because now I’m British so I want to speak like them. Yeah, that’s why I every day do like my experience, my language. Because they say to me now MT, now you speak good English. Speaking is like good, better they say to me. I’m glad every day, I’m excited tomorrow it’s be better.

Yeah, it’s different. But I want to be like here. I don’t want to be like my country, to be honest. I want to be like here because now I’m here, because I don’t want to be back there or I don’t want to be like them. I want to be like here. ‘ PP3

The participant’s inclination to hold on to the positive experiences in the UK, while distancing herself from the difficult memories of her home country, may contribute to her desire to identify as British and to leave her former life behind.

For PP5, receiving status provided him with financial resources, which opened up new possibilities and choices. For instance, he could now choose to buy his

own food, in contrast to eating the food provided by the hotel, which he had previously struggled with. Additionally, the participant shared:

“Oh, I want to go cycling. Or I want to go for a walk, or I can meet my friend, or I can go shopping, or so different things like, do you feel you have a lot of that here in in UK.”

Another participant, PP6, expressed his happiness and gratitude for the choices and opportunities he has experienced in the UK:

"The UK is good. I am happy. I am especially happy with the UK because they give me lots and lots of chances. When I came here, I just told you before about the doctors, GPs. Every time, any appointments, they give [them to me]. Any opportunities for my health, they take care of my health. They care about my living places. They care about all the food, drinks, the benefits, my education. I think the UK is good for everyone. Because I ask lots of people, young and under 18 or older. All of them say it's good opportunities. They give a lot of chances and benefits to live. When you get your documents, they find you a job."

Receiving his status has also opened up the possibility of starting his own business, an opportunity he views as a significant personal achievement that would not have been possible otherwise:

“When I get my documents so I decided to do my studies. With my studies I should start my own businesses. Like which I am now deciding to start a business. So, it’s a big decision to make for yourself”

It was evident from the participants' experiences that not having permission to work while their claims were being processed was a significant challenge.

Receiving their status served as a major facilitator in overcoming this obstacle.

Subtheme 2 – Ongoing Constraints on Agency

While the status brought relief and facilitated agency, it highlighted the complex nature of the status itself, and that it was not all smooth sailing from there.

There were continued challenges facing the participants.

‘To be honest since that time, that was what, a year, a year and a half I will say, I am just so frustrated to be frank. I’ve been on the council list, the Guildford one. This December it’s going to be exactly five years but still nothing from them. You know I’m just staying with friends so I don’t have any specific place. I cannot work, I cannot do many things at the moment. It was good before but this year was you know a bit rough on me. I’ve been to a couple of shops, the barber, I’m a barber, I’ve been to a couple of shops and they offered me a job as well. But the thing is I can’t because maybe by next week I’m back to Guildford. I’m just with this friend so it’s not like it’s my place to

you know stay all the time. And they don't want someone like, they want someone when they say work you can go to work. They call me and like ask where are you and I say in Guildford I can't go to work then. So, finding a job is quite hard for me to be honest.'' PP4

PP4 conveyed his frustration over the ongoing challenges he faces due to his housing and employment situation. Despite being on the council housing list for a long time, he still hasn't been able to secure an affordable place, leaving him without a permanent place to live. As a result, he has been relying on friends for temporary accommodation, which makes it difficult to establish stability. This lack of a fixed address also impacts his ability to secure and maintain employment. Although he has received job offers as a barber, he explained that his transient living situation prevents him from committing to work, as he might have to relocate suddenly. This uncertainty and instability have made it incredibly challenging for him to build a steady life, exacerbating his frustration.

'So, let's say came to the UK but like as a refugee I am not a criminal or anything, but when they putting in placement like when I told you I am living alone, it start to get harder. Like now where I am living, I live like with people who get out from prison and people who has mental problems. So, I mean

where you're living, you don't feel like you're living home. Not only for me, but many refugees so it's not a happy moment.'' PP2

PP2 reflects on the stigma and dehumanization often associated with being a refugee, expressing frustration at being equated to criminals or marginalized groups. She describes her accommodation as a shared space with individuals recently released from prison or facing mental health challenges. For PP2, this living arrangement symbolizes a broader societal perception that refugees are not considered “good enough” to be integrated into mainstream society. While she acknowledges that she can remain in such accommodation even after receiving her status, the experience raises deeper concerns about societal attitudes towards refugees and the long-term impact of such marginalization on their sense of belonging and self-worth.

The complex nature of obtaining status highlights the challenges of family reunification. While gaining the status has brought stability and relief to the participants, it does not permit them to travel back to their home countries, as doing so could put their status at risk. This restriction, though understandable given the nature of claiming asylum, remains a significant difficulty for the young participants, as they miss their families and continue to worry about their safety in their home countries. However, on gaining citizenship, the status whether of refugee or humanitarian protection, gets revoked, and individuals

can exercise their freedom of movement like any other British citizen (Home Office, 2025). For instance, PP4 reflects, ‘*The only thing I am waiting for is just after these 5 years, I think after 2023, when I apply for the remain to stay like a proper British passport, by that time I can go back to Kurdistan. If I can find family and meeting them is just going to be quite nice.*’

Theme 5 - Personal Transformations

This was an insightful emerging theme in the participants' narratives. For some participants, the experience of claiming asylum and living in the UK led to personal transformations, highlighting new perspectives, strengths, and life-changing moments that connect to broader potential and possibilities for the young people.

‘No, there's a lot of things that's changed in my life, and I would say it's changed me as well. It changed like a lot of things. especially growing up with people who are not Muslims and who are English. It changed my life a lot. And so, I've understood that. The humanity works as well. It's not all about yourself or religion. Cause back, then, in Afghanistan it's a sort of idea that you have to be Muslim and everything is about Muslim people. And they're the greatest people wherever they will help you anywhere. No one else helps you whereas

here. I grew up within this family, and they helped me a lot and like my own, like my own thoughts and minds and things like that

But, when I came over here and grew up with his family, it changed my mind.

Change everything, and what I used to think and stuff like that. It changed a lot.

Everything changed.’’ PP7

PP7’s impactful reflection on how his intimate experience of living with a Christian family has changed him, and potentially his outlook on the world, is noteworthy. He reflected on his initial thoughts upon arrival about being fostered in a Christian family, expressing doubts and feeling that he would be better suited living with a Muslim family. However, he was able to experientially witness the value of diversity, the connection between interfaith individuals, and, as he notes, the value of humanity overall.

‘It’s different. It change everything. When I come. I’m shy, I don’t talk like this.

Even when I want to talk, I’m shying because I’m not good speaking. If my

English like this maybe they laugh. But now, no. I’m not afraid. I’m not shying

because I know it’s not my first language but I want to try to know everything.

Something wrong or I’m not understanding, I ask to them, I don’t understand or can you change the word, can you use for me simple English.

Yeah, because I want to know. I don’t want to be shying. If I didn’t know

sometimes the person is like yeah, I know I know better but they talk like that, I

didn't do that. I ask to them and I want to know everything. But I'm not afraid. I'm not shy now. I just confidently I talk.' PP3

Drawing directly from her experiences in the UK, PP3 feels transformed. She is no longer shy; she is confident, able to express her needs, ask questions, and is not afraid. Instead, she is open to learning and new experiences.

'About my age, there is big difference. I couldn't imagine, it passed so quickly. At that time, I was young and weak, in the way I just passed it. I couldn't decide lots of things I didn't know about lots of things. I had no information about it. But now I can decide by myself. Like I can plan anything. Now I don't think I need any help, some person in lots of area I don't need any help to like before I had when I came here. So, it's a big difference.' PP6

PP6's reflection on his time indicates that he has also experienced an expanded sense of confidence and growth since his arrival. He described himself as being 'young' and 'weak' at first, but now sees himself as having greater capacity, decision-making abilities, and increased awareness and knowledge.

4.1.2 Secondary Participant (SP) Themes

Theme 1 – Navigating a Hostile and Disempowering Asylum System

A strong theme that emerged from the interviews with professionals, was their understanding of the asylum system to be a hostile and disempowering experience for unaccompanied children and young people. To highlight the varied perspectives of the participants in a nuanced way, I have categorized the data under 5 subthemes which are as follows:

Sub theme 1 – Overwhelming Complexity and Lengthy Asylum Process

This sub theme addresses the participants views on the complexity of the asylum process which can be felt as quite a shock to the young people. There is a sense of the enormity of the system which can be quite challenging for children and young people to navigate. The participants had strong feelings about the brutal nature of asylum for instance:

‘It's really, it's horrendous, because it takes so long. That's the biggest problem of it is that it takes so long. And they are left wondering for such a long time that Limbo is brutal. You know there are problems within that solicitors not

giving the right information. Social work is not giving the right information. them, not knowing how to behave or how the process will be... And so, arriving and realizing that they could be waiting 3 or 4 years. Even to get the right to work. That can be. You know. It's like a falling house of cards” (SP2)

SP2 highlights in this excerpt the multilayered issues of seeking asylum for the unaccompanied children and young people and also going on to point out fundamental errors in procedures that take place, for instance, the Home Office losing records or the wrong date of birth listed on the biometric residence permit (BRP), or getting the wrong language interpreters for interviews. The metaphor of Asylum as house of falling cards is an interesting one, indicating the fragility and lack of sustainability of the system, but also the ‘falling’ state symbolizing dysfunction and lack of capacity to hold itself steady and accountable.

Participants indicate the complexity and lengthy process being tied to each other where the state of ‘being in limbo’ and the uncertainty of the process is very painful for the young people to endure:

‘I think it's very confusing for them. It's very confusing for adults.. it's confusing for anybody. It's a long process... . And it just takes such a long time.

The whole process is not a fast process. It takes such a long time. and also it's really hard for them. I guess, to understand that their journey is only just beginning, just beginning being an asylum seeker and then becoming a refugee. It's going to be a really tough life. It's not easy. It's not going to be easy. And so even when they get their papers through. it's still a long way to go for them ” (SP4)

SP4 states the confusing asylum process is difficult for anyone let alone for unaccompanied children and young people to comprehend. SP4 further states that due to the complex nature of this system, there is a lack of clarity on roles and services which impacts on the young people being fully aware of their options and areas of seeking the right information.

The asylum system being child unfriendly is yet again emphasized by SP7 who states:

“Is not user friendly for children. So the whole thing about seeking asylum is not user friendly” SP7

This implies that the nature of seeking asylum is not built on a supportive pretext, where the person navigating it, is likely to confront complex and ongoing challenges rather than a straightforward process.

Sub theme 2 – Barriers to Expression and Agency

This sub theme brings forth the systemic barriers to expression and agency that the young people are confronted with according to the participants who have worked with them closely in different capacities. The participants reported the asylum system to be controlling, dominating and rigid, without an understanding of young people's needs.

“The system more widely, It's not really like encouraging young people to express their thoughts and feelings right like even the structures that are supposed to like be the place where young people can do that like I've been to like a couple of young people's 'Looked after child review', which I think in theory, is a place where the young people can, a young person can express their desires. And in reality I've not found that those meetings really like facilitate the young person to actually express that sort of feelings” (SP3)

SP3 indicates that while there are official procedures in place to review young people's needs, they are in practice ineffective and do not facilitate true expression. SP3 further states that there is such a fear of the system itself due to the way it functions, some young people choose to escape, i.e. runaway as a way of exercising the agency they have in this situation. SP3 reflects further that agency is an inherent trait and that ‘we all have it’ but it is particularly

challenging in this context as young people's life experiences put them at a crossroads with their legal status of a minor. Further, SP3 considers there is age appropriate agency that needs to be acknowledged that might suggest limited agency for young people. Similarly, SP2 stated there is limited agency of young people and that situational agency might be easier to consider.

Participants reported the system itself to be hindering agency or that there is no true agency within the system. There is an unequitable distribution of resources where *'getting access to the right education is a lottery'* and that one can either *'sink or swim'* (SP7). And therefore limited resources play a huge role in young people's access to choices and opportunities.

"There's this, there a kind of really limited framework and resources and limited understanding of the needs of young people.. and within that Framework therapy or healing or recovery becomes really, really difficult and complex.. And even thinking about the limited resources across services or in social care support. Often the choices will be very much limited. Yeah. or their agency. Well I'm concerned that at times their agency might not be respected, and ... The professionals will need to manage expectations around young people which is often related to agency. And yeah, kind of blocking the expression of Agency."
(SP5)

SP5 stated expressed agency of unaccompanied children and young people is disregarded and the system itself is a barrier in recovery and healing.

“They’re always asking the young people’s feedback but something like accommodation when they can’t move, it makes them feel very upset, very powerless, makes them people don’t care about them, like people aren’t listening.” (SP6)

Similarly, SP6 is highlighting that young people feel unheard and powerless within the system. SP6 also stated there is an uneven access to resources where young people are comparing what they have access to amongst each other. Further there is a very real lack of availability of resources like semi-independent accommodations, which creates extremely lengthy wait periods for young people to move out of fostering placements and start to live more independently when they are of certain age.

Sub theme 3 – Devaluation and Hostility by the Asylum System

This sub theme captures how the asylum system undermines the dignity and worth of unaccompanied children and young people thereby impacting their sense of agency. There is an inherent distrust towards asylum seekers where

young people are not believed by the system, they are devalued and seeking asylum is therefore a hostile experience.

‘‘Its more than frustrating. It’s terrible. Unbelievable. How can you exclude refugee and unaccompanied children whose whole lives have been turned upside down and they don’t have a next of kin who can appeal. This is oppressive practice’’ (SP1)

This is a short excerpt from SP1’s narrative of how an unaccompanied child very clearly suffering from mental health difficulties while seeking asylum, was not able to fulfill the college’s attendance criteria. SP1 advocated for this young person however the college sought to follow the same procedure as for other students where the next of kin can appeal the college’s decision on discontinuing a student’s enrollment due to lack of sufficient attendance. SP1 was horrified that the administration could not understand that this young person was unaccompanied and does not have family here to appeal this decision. Furthermore, this young person was unaware of these big decisions being made and communicated to him via email which he was unfamiliar with and did not use as a usual mode of communication. SP1 felt strongly that unaccompanied children and refugees cannot be excluded from access to education and that their situation is completely not considered and handled insensitively by institutions and the system itself. For those accessing education,

SP2 felt they have to negotiate asylum stressors daily which has an impact on how they engage with education.

SP1 and SP3 also reported UASCs and young people struggle with their identity within the system, negotiating their age, their development and their self-worth, and their fears are amplified while seeking asylum.

SP5 reported that the asylum system in the UK is a 'system of doubt rather than system of support' where UASCs face continued dehumanization, their needs are neglected and the system is violating their rights.

‘We often have to write a lot of letters to update the Home Office about basic needs that should be understood without really any input from professionals. They're really common needs. People should be able to express them. But I don't think that the stance of young people, or their experience has been taken into account under any circumstances that's Why they often require professionals, letters. Think that limits their agency even more so unless the professional says so: Their experience is not valid’ (SP5)

SP2 highlighted that the government is responsible for normalising the racist and anti-refugee sentiments, and that a lot of effort is put by people like herself and others in the community to counter racist rhetoric and work on facilitating

the local community bonding with unaccompanied children, young people and refugee families.

“Despite all the bile and horrid rhetoric online, there are so many people in the community who are open and friendly and welcoming... people to work together to bring stories and the narrative out to the community. It’s some way of sort of just to counterbalance the racist rhetoric that’s coming out of this government”
(SP2)

The participants noted the traumatic Home Office encounters young people have and how their stability is constantly under threat which leads to a lack of basic needs and safety. This theme points to the dismissive nature of the system towards UASCs and young people, demonstrating its role in disempowering the young people they are supposed to protect and creating a sense of learned helplessness.

Sub theme 4 – Impact of Age Assessments

Participants noted the detrimental effect of age assessments on UASCs which are vague in their nature and prove to be stressful for the young person and their Foster Carer by extension.

“He had an age assessment, which was ridiculous and in the end, it was incredibly stressful. Their decision was that he was one year older than he said he was so they put him from 16 to 17. He was really upset so when they came back and told him that they had decided on a different birth date for him, he was really upset. He was at the doorstep smoking and crying which was not like him at all. I was absolutely mad and cross.” (SP6)

Majority of the participants noted that age assessments are intrusive and invasive without any consideration for the young person in question.

“I’m also very concerned about the new Immigration Bill and all the talks around medical procedures to aid to assess age. that I think that’s really invasive, and it doesn’t really take into account the view or the needs of the young person.” (SP5)

SP3 pointed out that age disputed children have intensive needs and also illustrated the complexity that arises within this:

“And I think sometimes with like unaccompanied children who have been age disputed that I work with. They really struggle with that, because if they’ve been living in a hotel, for, you know, a year before they got their age accepted. you know. During that time nobody was making them go to college. They could stay

out late at night. They could come back when they want. They could sleep until 11 AM. And then suddenly, they're like, you know, they're fighting and fighting or fighting to have the fact that they're 16 recognized. And then they get the fact that they're 16 recognized. And then they're like, what do you mean? I can't go and stay at my friend's house. Well, do you really have to wake up at 7 AM. To go to college 5 days a week, because 2 weeks ago I didn't even have the right to go into college. I think that this. you know, okay, like this, feels to them that their agency is taken away” (SP3)

SP3 stated that when UASCs are age disputed and treated like adults, they can be in unsupervised accommodations, not being offered educational access.

When their appeals are successful and their ages are officially accepted, young people are then required to adhere to curfews, live under supervision, and attend college, despite having, until recently, experienced little to no formal oversight. This illustrated the complex nature of UASC agency that needs to be negotiated due to continued changes in circumstances.

Sub theme 5 – Systemic Reformation

This sub theme emerged from the participants views on the necessary changes of the system for it to function more effectively. The participants noted that there is a dearth of necessary resources, the organizations are under pressure

and understaffed implying a need for a better allocation and understanding of resource management.

‘‘I’m not saying we shouldn’t have an asylum process. Of course, we should, but the Home Office could do it better than this. With all the money they’ve spent on Rwanda, they could have got a really good system in place’’ (SP2).

As the system is complex and confusing, there is lack of clarity on roles and services. SP7 suggests consideration of the guardianship scheme to tackle that–

‘‘And that’s it’s one person who looks at them, you know, in terms of their housing, their education, their status. So they don’t have to go to lots of different people to sort things out, and that has worked really well in Scotland, and I think there are some people who advocate that for that, for here’’ (SP7).

Participants noted the need for quality legal support, which is not always accessible for UASCs and refugees more generally. This is reflected in SP2’s statement:

"You know there are problems within that, solicitors not giving the right information."

Similarly, SP6 noted that she was fortunate with the solicitors she worked with before COVID-19, after which legal services became busier and less accessible.

Some deeper, more systemic issues were also raised, including the racist nature of the asylum system, which is explored further in Sub-theme 3. For instance, SP2 highlighted the role of their organisation in responding to discrimination:

"We do see a lot of the far-right stuff. It feels like in some small way being able to respond to that awful divisive hatred that we're seeing around us, being able to stand up a little to that racism, Islamophobia, anti-refugee rhetoric that's going on."

Participants also expressed concerns about re-traumatisation through interactions with the Home Office, as reflected in the following statements:

"I talk quite a lot about the whole issue of the trauma of encounters with the Home Office." SP7

"It's an extremely hostile process. It is. I do not want to say that it is experienced as an interrogation, because it is an interrogation." SP5

Finally, participants noted the need for a culturally sensitive approach to agency and the importance of a more welcoming and humane asylum system, as SP5 reflected:

"A friendlier and welcoming system, that's really important, because at the moment the system is not respectful of children's rights, and understandably that impacts on agency. The other thing that could change in terms of agency

and therapy specifically: I think we need more intercultural approaches, because often agency across different cultures is very different."

Theme 2 – Fulfillment and Frustration in Refugee Advocacy

All of the participants expressed a positive and meaningful experience of working with unaccompanied children and young people and it emerged as a relevant theme as it underlies the commitment and motivation for the professionals to continue this work despite the challenges, and this has a consequent impact on the young people they work with.

SP1, SP2 and SP3 stated that when they started working in the refugee sector, it was by chance or was meant to be temporary. For instance, SP1 started working with unaccompanied children because of the need at the time and how they were coming into educational spaces:

‘When we first started the course, in fact most of the children were from economic migrant parents. From countries like Poland, Romania, the Philippines as well you know for the NHS. Also, the Nepalese because there is a Gurkha community here. Over the years, we saw this huge increase in the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children coming from Kurdistan and Iraq and Eritrea and then it dipped a little bit and then it went right back up with Afghans and Syrians.’ SP1

Similarly, with SP2, she started working with young people due to the educational space she worked in:

‘So, I started in 2014 by accident because I was working at University in their post-doctoral school teaching there. And the opportunity came up to go to a further education college to teach teenagers... So, I started running an academic project for displaced teenagers, and we started off with 6... and we ended up with about 50’ SP2

With SP3, it was supposed to be temporary till she decided to want to do more long-term work with young people:

‘I did this while I was in Calais you know, had seen on the news about what was happening there. And I was between jobs. And I thought, Okay, I’ll go there for, like, you know, 2 or 3 months. I have, like an art background. So go and like, run art workshops and learn about the situation, and then come back to the UK and go back to my normal job working in the art sector. And then this was in February 2020. So then the Coronavirus happened, and I was not going to come back to the UK and be unemployed. So then I stayed in France for like one and a half years in the end, and eventually like, was motivated to like, leave

France and come back to the UK because I wanted to do more long term work with young people” SP3

However, they chose to continue this work more dedicatedly once they had experienced it. For instance, SP2 runs an organization supporting unaccompanied children and young people.

SP4 and SP6 were moved by the ‘refugee crisis’ and wanted to offer more proactive support and involvement.

“So, the motivation back in 2015 was basically sitting in a local government office watching this crisis unfold through social media and just thinking Oh My God. I really want to do something but I don’t know what to do I didn’t want to just give money to an organization, I actively wanted to physically do something. So physically going to the jungle to do something. You know, physically working with people. That was just really important”. SP4

“In 2016, there was the big sort of refugee crisis in Europe with Syrians coming across Europe and being welcomed in Germany particularly. Obviously, the tragedy of Alan Kurdi. I’m feeling quite choked up about it actually when I think about it. I was so frustrated and angry that we couldn’t do more in this country. So, I thought I could be angry or engage with the process so we did and we

decided that according to our personal circumstances at the time... so went on the emergency fostering list in October and we got someone within two days. Surrey at the time was having a lot of young people coming in through the lorries." SP6

All participants expressed a personal and emotional impact of working with unaccompanied children and young people and that this has been rewarding and fulfilling experience.

'It'll sound really what's the word, slightly cliched but its challenging but rewarding. It really is. And as I say, I'm not longer the course leader but I've always continued to teach that cohort because I always I feel it's a very important group to be teaching. They can be quite challenging but a) it's very important and b) it's very rewarding. And ultimately, I think it's rewarding for them. It's not just about me. But I do find it rewarding' SP1

It's important to note that SP1 finds a direct impact of her own work with unaccompanied children and young people on them, and ultimately this work to be rewarding for them.

‘It feels very purposeful which is good. It feels quite empowering. And do you know a lot of the time we spend an awful lot of time laughing and feeling joyful as well.’ SP2

‘You know what I’ve been able to do since I’ve been here, where I might work with some of the same young people more than 2 years. and that, yeah, that’s really special... MY favourite thing about this work is like the relationships that we get to build with young people and being able to build those out over a really sustained period of time rather than just you know for a couple of week or something. It’s really special.’ SP3

“ [Fostering) It’s actually probably one of the best experiences that I’ve ever had, because these boys are our family.... And I’ve learnt so much about not just them, but about myself. It makes you really value things in life. It makes you value what is important. And I’ve learned so much about different countries. It’s a very special thing. I wouldn’t change it for the world” SP4

‘I do find it really rewarding. I think it’s always great to work with teenagers because they have really different perspectives on how life is, or ways of seeing life, that never even crossed my mind. It’s great to hear reflections and the ways of thinking, and I think the new generations have a lot to offer to the world and teach us. So, I think it is an honor to work with this population.’ SP5

‘‘You know I’m super glad. This is the best thing I have ever done really.’’ SP6

‘‘Oh, it’s been incredibly enriching for me, I mean just fabulous... You think the amazing stories, the richness of stories that you have. It’s absolutely strengthened my relationship to my local area and the people I know.’’ SP7

Furthermore, participants demonstrated their own investment and commitment in the young people’s growth and wellbeing, and the joy they experienced in seeing the young people evolve in their confidence and sense of agency.

‘‘We have one young man at the moment he came to us, he’s been with us for two years. He came right at the end of the academic year, not last year but the year before. He’s actually been with us over 3 different academic years and his background is Iraqi Kurdish and when he first came, he would not look at me. He couldn’t understand. He would get up and go out of the room after ten minutes and he came across as very defensive and actually quite aggressive. Through a few translators, he was like I don’t want to be in that class I don’t understand what they are saying. They are humiliating me and all of this. Over the last academic year and this year, we have seen him just open up. He’s not perfect but he can understand he can communicate he can speak. He’s made friends. His writing might not be perfect but his speaking and listening is very

good. It's a complete transformation from those first months when we could hardly get him to stay in a room for more than ten minutes and he could hardly look me in the eye. And every year you see transitions.... I feel humbled really. Very emotional if you think about it. It's all very cliched but getting a smile out of him is like worth you know a million smiles from someone else.'' SP1

'A young girl that that joined us probably about 6 months ago. She's tiny and she's from the Horn of Africa. And she made the journey alone, which is really unusual. and she came like she looked like a shadow when I first met her. She was like a shadow. very quiet, talked in a whisper almost. And she kept coming to more and more things, and her voice got louder and her voice is getting louder, and we went on a residential, because we also do residential, and there was 1 point where they had to lift this huge bucket of feed over this gate into the troughs for the cows. And I went to lift it up, and it was quite heavy, and I'm old, and I've got a bad back, and so I put it down, and she came along, said, no, no, no, I do it, I do it. She lifted up above her head and tipped it over and I said to her, You're really strong. And even the boys were sort of saying, Wow, you're strong. And she turned around and beamed and She goes. Yes, yes, yes, I'm strong. I'm unusually strong. And since that moment she seemed to just come into herself. We we're quite careful around physical, any kind of physical attention we pay to the kids. But the other day, I just stepped out in front of her,

and I didn't even think of it, and gave her a big hug because it was seeing, you know, this this girl is actually she's she feels like she's on her way.''' SP2

Some personal frustrations and difficult experiences were also expressed by participants. This is noteworthy because these were expressed emphatically by the participants who are the ones working closely and dedicatedly with the young people.

''I personally find it outrageous to hear that young people have to go through this. and we're talking about young people who have arrived in the UK with threat of their own lives in reach for safety and it's so disappointing to experience the wider culture of doubt that unless they prove that they are safe they will not be safe. Not be supported. I think it is outrageous to put children in that position.''' SP5

''These are young people have seen some really difficult things. A lot of them are reeling in the aftermath of hugely traumatic events, with, with nothing to root them. A lot of them are struggling to get that mental balance. So occasionally we meet people who are frightening for us. I've had one experience, one terrible experience. It was very public in 2017 before organisation actually started, and that absolutely rocked my world, and because of that I'm, I can be frightened'' SP2

‘‘Then his asylum claim was rejected. Maybe that was the second worst time in my life after COVID. That was awful because it was really stressful. I was thinking that I knew a little bit more by now so if gets rejected, what are we going to do.’’ SP6

These personal difficulties and frustrations can prompt the question about support for the professionals and the consequent impact on young people’s agency.

Participants expressed concerns around burnout which often stem from the high emotional toll of this work, especially in environments with systemic obstacles. While the rewarding work seems to sustain the professionals in their role, it illustrates the impact of varied and prolonged effects of stress. One instance:

‘‘When you’re fostering it, it is incredibly emotional. You never know what trauma is going to come with that child. Some more than others. But if there’s quite bad trauma there, it is really emotional. It is, and it can be really quite draining. So, I think one of the things I would say. It’s really important to look after your mental wellbeing. Which, and it made me more conscious.’’ SP4

Theme 3 – Realities of working with a complex needs population

This theme covers the frequent and day-to-day challenges associated with the diverse and multifaceted needs of unaccompanied minors, including cultural, mental health, and developmental aspects. Here, professionals are responding to complex issues and also adapting their support to meet individual needs, requiring thoughtful interventions that shape young people's sense of agency.

Participants expressed the complexity involved in supporting unaccompanied children and young people and that in some roles, it is difficult to address their emotional needs. However, participants reported being able to witness and observe young people's mental health struggles and trauma symptoms.

‘I think the whole thing about trauma comes out a lot in the book... and how you know the need for people working with them to have some kind of approach, because you know what I found with all refugee organizations... there was almost like a cutting off of not wanting to hear about their past experiences, and that I've I interviewed Syrian children on the island of Bute in Scotland... and he said, people don't ask me about my past, and he said, I don't know if it's because they're not interested or they don't want or they don't want to upset me. I sort of thought. You know, people are very hesitant and obviously, and the other therapist from in that film...and she talks about the need for set spaces and people having agency and how they share their stories. But I found

this very much, this view of some people working with refugees that that you don't talk about their past“’ SP7

SP7 noted from her experience that people working in refugee organisations are unable to address a young person's past and that it is complicated trying to navigate wanting to offer support while not feeling equipped to address their emotional and mental health needs.

“I was the course leader for stepping up and really my role became as much pastoral as it was academic. Because so many of those people had problems you know sometimes with mental health sometimes with where they were living. You know attendance and sometimes you know practical things like they didn't have the money to get the bus from Ipswich to Colchester without having to go through a complicated form to get the bursary. I noticed that there was a big increase in the pastoral support that they needed.” SP1

SP1 noted the need for pastoral support while working as a teacher and indicated dual roles and responsibilities. SP1 also indicated the need to be mindful but not intrusive in conversations. SP1 also expressed that ESOL is a time that is needed for young people to acclimatize to the surroundings, culture and host country.

Participants found that working within the refugee sector is difficult and that some opted for further training to understand this context as well as how to better support unaccompanied children and young people in their roles.

‘That's when I started doing the masters. So, I could understand a little bit more about the context of displacement, loss of home, what it means to be displaced. Then after a couple of years, it became clear how many gaps there were in the support for these young people’ SP2

‘I found the course very useful and in different ways. It helped me put my experiences in context so it was very useful because I already a lot of experience so it helped me to put it in kind of a framework. It also helped me to validate what I was already doing; maybe explain why I was doing it. It helped me to feel a lot more confident in the way I was working already. Certainly, gave me a lot to think about and helped me to understand some of what was going on and enabled me to step back from my practice a bit more. When I started, it was very much about one person which is my foster son and then it enabled me to use my experience and maybe have a slightly wider perspective.’

SP6

Complexity of this work was highlighted by participants in different areas.

For instance, providing psychological therapy.

‘Working as a therapist, I think offering therapy to this population becomes really complex from the perspective that therapy almost comes across as a luxury when basic needs and safety are not met.

And the reason why I do like working with this population as a therapist at the same time is because therapy does become very creative and flexible, because it has to be adaptable to the needs of young people and continuously changing in usual ways Westernized ideas around therapy will not necessarily work with this population most often not.’ SP5

SP5 indicating that therapy often comes across as a luxury when the young people are not having their basic needs met. SP5 also goes on to explain the need for culturally sensitive and aware forms of therapy and agency to suit this client population which comes from diverse parts of the world, and that the Western therapy framework is not suitable. Further, there is a need for the young people to have stability for trauma recovery and that therapy can be useful here but not necessarily a priority. Therapy should be a choice for the young people to access. Just like the need for flexibility and creativity in therapy expressed by SP5, SP4 and SP6 expressed the need for flexibility as Foster Carers. Complexity in fostering is highlighted through the following quotes.

‘‘He did go into foster care, and he was fostered first by a British woman that didn't work so well. Then he was fostered with an Eritrean woman. So that worked well. You can't find a Somali foster carer for every Somalia, you know it's complicated, but finding foster carers that which are more diverse, and finding foster carers that have some empathy or understanding, etc. So, I think the whole thing about foster care.’’ SP7

SP7 pointing to difficulties in finding the right fostering placement for a young person, and that while matching same nationalities and ethnicities might not be possible, the open and diverse mindset of foster carers is significant.

‘‘For some young people, they have come from a culture where they don't accept LGBTQ + and we have been very open with them that we do have friends who are LGBTQ + and we will not have any bad talk, or you know anything against our friends. This is how it is. And it's respecting all religions. It's respecting women. Because sometimes there have been conversations where maybe women haven't been spoken of or respected in the way that they should. So, it's ensuring very much that you respect everybody. We respect you. You respect us.’’ SP4

SP4 highlighting the complexity of navigating difficult conversations regarding different cultural, religious beliefs and gendered roles. SP4 also reported the

need for preparing foster kids for asylum realities like financial literacy and understanding healthy choices. While some conversations have proved more challenging than others, SP4 appreciated the honesty and transparency within their family unit.

“I keep trying to introduce training for non-Muslim foster carers for the month of Ramadan because it’s just so difficult. There’s like noise and cooking going on and if you’ve got two of them, you have chatting going on in the middle of the night. Which is kind of annoying. Then you also have to realize that for them it’s very difficult because normally Ramadan would be a lovely time you spend with your family and to be away from home and being in a house that’s not doing Ramadan and not celebrating and not making a thing of it, feels very bad.” SP6

SP6 pointed to the need for training for Foster Carers to work with unaccompanied children of different faith than their own and the challenging home environment with very different needs. SP6 went on to note that despite the challenge, the month of Ramadan did create an opportunity for her and the foster son to bond through sharing faith-based stories online:

“So, the nice thing about Ramadan was that we could have these conversations then and it was a nice thing to build our relationship on. I was learning more

about Islam and we weren't talking about homework. So that's the really nice thing about Ramadan.'' SP6

Another participant detailed that while they have wanted to foster the growth and development of the young people, they do casework with, by instilling in them more confidence and the capacity to do things by themselves with their support, it can be seen as lack of concern from the young person's perspective:

'By just doing those things for a young person rather than helping them figure out how to do those things for themselves in a way you somehow contribute to like keeping them where they are, you know. Not like that's a kind of like personal like growth and growing up and development and like becoming more independent. I think sometime like it's not always easy to explain to a young person why you're trying to do it that way. If I've had a young person where she'll come and ask me to help her write an email to her like college teacher. And I'll say, like no like I know that you can write that email by yourself.... part of the feedback that she gave me was like. Sometimes I feel like Shona doesn't care about me because this time that I asked her to write to help me write an email, and she wouldn't do it, so that I had to do it myself.'' SP3

SP7 highlighted the challenges in doing research with refugees and young people and difficulties in recruitment, and that ultimately one's own personal networks prove to be really helpful in aiding this process.

Participants indicated to the complexity of the professional's race, age and gender background. For instance:

‘Plus, I'm a woman. The vast majority of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people are boys. So, I'm a woman from a different culture. I don't speak their language so I think it is quite difficult for them really. I try to be as approachable and sympathetic as I can but I don't really know if they feel they can.’ SP1

‘Learnt all the hard lessons of how you can get things wrong and how you know you can cause, especially as a white woman, you know, you can get into all sorts of problems, really. I mean you're coming from a different place.’ SP7

Most participants expressed that working with young people has brought forth the issues around trust, and that it takes time and effort to nurture relationships with these young people to facilitate that sense of trust.

While burnout was noted in the previous theme, it was expressed by participants that due to the complexity of the client needs, professionals can suffer burnouts especially due to the high demand in the organizations. The need for boundaries at work and managing workloads was also expressed.

‘‘As a clinician it can really take a toll on you, because at the same time of the of the complexity of needs that you're facing. I have burnout, I have reached burnout before.’’ SP5

Across both primary and secondary participant data sets, broader structural factors emerged as significant barriers to young people's experiences of agency. Young people described the disempowering impact of prolonged uncertainty, complex asylum processes, and bureaucratic challenges, while professionals similarly highlighted systemic flaws that constrained young people's ability to exercise agency. The asylum system's complexity, the impact of hostile political discourses, and restrictive policy environments were consistently reported as limiting factors that shaped the everyday realities and longer-term trajectories of young people's lives. These structural barriers formed a backdrop against which both sets of participants narrated experiences of agency, dependency, and constraint.

4.2 DISCUSSION

This chapter interprets and contextualizes the findings of this study, addressing the research questions by exploring the experiences of agency among unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people, alongside the perspectives of professionals who support them.

The section discusses findings from the two data sets separately and then provides an integrative synthesis.

4.2.1 PRIMARY PARTICIPANTS DISCUSSION

Five themes emerged from the analysis of data collected from primary participants, i.e., the young people. I will discuss each theme and its relevance to the research questions.

Theme 1 – The Path to safety

Seeking safety and the feeling of being safe emerged as a crucial theme that emerged in the young people's experiences. Given the depth of the narratives, this theme is further divided into subthemes for an in-depth exploration and discussion.

Subtheme 1 – Unsafe circumstances at Home

While the experiences prior to their arrival were not the focus of the study, it was evident that these experiences could not be separated from their present circumstances. The meaning and value of feeling safe in the UK were highlighted through participant's accounts of the difficulties and dangers they faced which ultimately led to their departure. Consistent with previous studies (for instance, Ayotte, 1998; Thomas et al., 2004; Hopkins & Hill, 2008) the young people experienced a range of factors that posed a direct threat to their safety and wellbeing. Participants shared fears of religious persecution, verbal threats and assaults, shootings and grenade attack by ISIS, as well as death threats from the Taliban and an inability to pursue schooling. The lack of safety in everyday life was poignant, interfering with routine activities for the participants and highlighting their limited agency.

For most participants, their family members had decided that they would leave the country and had planned how this would happen. In discussing this, PP4 expressed that he was unable to decline his father's decision for him to leave, highlighting the difficult position he was in. While he was able to carry out the decided course of action, i.e., leaving the country, this may not have been his personal choice. Another participant, PP7 stated that the decision to leave was made for him, but had it been his choice, he would have stayed back in his home country, indicating a continued longing for his homeland.

Some more complexity of the circumstances was highlighted through another participant, PP2 who stated the following -

‘It was my family’s decision and some of it was mine. So, when my family offered me and I accepted because the situation in my country wasn’t right. Yeah, and they offered me and I accepted and I said yes so the rest was my decision. ‘

She assertively expressed ownership of her decision to leave, even though it was initially suggested by her family. Her statement also invites speculation that, had she wished, she could have declined the request. However, she appeared cognizant of the circumstances and made an informed choice. This aligns with the perspective of Gleitman and Nir (2022), who caution against viewing child participation in adult-child activities or relationships as impulsive or uninformed. Instead, they argue such participation is often intentional and meaningful, emphasizing the value of their research on agency emerging through interaction.

Subtheme 2 – Perilous journey

As noted in the findings section of this subtheme, all the participants described undertaking arduous and uncertain journeys without fully knowing their

destination. They were also unaware of how long these journeys would take, with travel durations varying from two months to over a year. They endured extremely adverse conditions throughout their journey, often lacking access to food and water, as well as staying in crowded rooms with strangers, fearing for their safety, and experiencing constant exhaustion. For instance, as noted in the findings section, PP6 stated -

'Without food, without drink, water and the weather was very high like in 40 more than 42 43 degree. With children and everyone was there. The smuggler of Iran were very dangerous because they everyone hitting too badly like by back kicking. Everyone's feet was like injury. No one could walk. Their shoes, I saw mine as well, everyone was the same. Their feet was injury. Everyone's hand feets were like injury. '

This highlighted the challenges of travelling long distances in extreme temperatures, enduring physical abuse by smugglers, carrying on despite injuries, and surviving without food or water. This subtheme emphasized the extreme hardships young people faced, illustrating how these harsh conditions, combined with a lack of support and basic necessities, restricted their agency. They were forced to persevere despite the significant mental, emotional, and physical toll it took on them. While the experiences prior to departure were

difficult and frightening, the journeys themselves also posed significant dangers, with the young people constantly facing imminent risks.

An interesting observation during an interview was that, for PP6, it seemed particularly important to communicate the difficulties he faced during his journey. He made an effort to recall all possible details and wanted to recount the experience step by step as it unfolded. While the journey itself highlighted the minimal agency he may have had at the time, during the interview, he appeared to use the opportunity to articulate his experience. In doing so, he seemed to assert his agency by taking control of his narrative and determining which elements of his journey need to be known and communicated as crucial to understanding his overall experience. Notably, he spoke more about his journey than about his time in the UK, offering valuable insights into the exercise of agency.

As Nardone and Correa-Velez (2015) note, refugee journeys have not been adequately investigated or given the attention they deserve, despite the lifelong impact they may have. They also highlight the short-lived nature of companionship and friendships during these journeys, a phenomenon that was also evident in the data from this research and expressed by some of the participants.

Additionally, young age and gender played a significant role in shaping the experiences of the young people on their journeys, as reflected in the data. Both female participants expressed fear about what might happen to them, remaining constantly alert and unable to sleep without fear. One male participant also recounted an instance where a young female traveller was sexually assaulted by smugglers.

These narratives demonstrate that experiences of risk were shaped not by age alone, but by the intersection of age, gender, and unaccompanied status. From an intersectional perspective, gender, age, and nationality impact migration for girls at every stage (Larkin, 2025). According to Larkin (2025), migration is a physical, cultural, and social experience for girls, influenced by the meanings attached to their bodies and how they inhabit those bodies as they move across place and time. Furthermore, during the stages of migration, girls are often seen through gendered and racialised lenses, which can either enable or constrain their ability to enact agency. They are continually adjusting their understanding of what it means to be a girl. As knowledge of unaccompanied girls' experiences remains limited, Larkin (2025) advocates for critically engaging with intersectionality and with oppressive structures and practices to deepen our understanding of the complexity of their lives.

Subtheme 3 – Safe Haven: safety and security in the UK

Participants expressed feeling safe upon their arrival in the UK. Following their arduous journeys, the absence of imminent danger, access to food, the ability to sleep in a bed, different factors that held significance for different participants, conveyed a sense of relief and reassurance. As expressed by participants, feeling safe enabled them to engage in activities such as studying, practicing their faith freely and enthusiastically, and experiencing an overall sense of well-being. This sense of safety consequently impacted and improved their quality of life.

Notably, participants also derived a sense of safety from people, not just the physical space. PP2 stated that –

“That time my Social Worker, her name was Zara, she confirm to me that I was in a safe place now and none of those things that were happening on the way was going to happen to me now. So, I knew that that was the place to be. “

This highlighted the significance of reassurance and relational comfort for young people provided by those responsible for their care. In this particular instance, one of their first interactions, the social worker was able to facilitate a sense of safety for the young person. This aligns with Kohli’s (2011) findings which noted that asylum-seeking children begin to feel safe by establishing predictable patterns in daily life, such as attending school, accessing healthcare,

and forming trustworthy and reliable companionships. Kohli also stated that rebuilding a sense of safety can take time. However, safety as a theme in the lives of young people appears to be an underexplored and undervalued aspect, despite its crucial role in fostering hope for a life free from further threats or disruptions.

As reflected in the various subthemes representing different stages of the young people's experiences, the findings highlight that the feeling of safety significantly expanded their sense of agency. Agency, therefore, can be understood as existing on a continuum that is contextual and interdependent, shaped by what the young person is doing, where they are, and how their circumstances evolve (Robson et al., 2007; Abebe, 2019). In this case, physical safety after arriving in the UK played a pivotal role in expanding their agency. No longer needing to constantly worry about threats and danger to their lives or fight for survival, they were able to envision and enact possibilities for action and choice. This newfound safety can be seen to enable them in influencing their own lives in meaningful ways. Thus, safety can be seen as a critical factor that facilitates their experience of agency, whereas the lack of safety, or insufficient safety, prior to their arrival in the UK, obstructed their sense of agency.

Theme 2 – The Period of Uncertainty

The theme of uncertainty emerged from the data, highlighting a ‘state of limbo’ - a prolonged waiting period for asylum claims to be processed, which caused significant distress for the young people. They expressed feelings of concern, constant worry, and being overwhelmed, often preoccupied with thoughts about the outcome. MiCLU (2022) found through data disclosed by the Home Office, that the average time taken to process UASC claims in the first quarter of 2022, was 758 days, and that the Home Office had been taking a significantly long time to process claims between 2015 and 2022.

As this number indicates, the average waiting period is over two years, which is a significant duration for young people awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. A report by the Refugee Council (2021) established a direct link between the reduction in casework staff and the increase in the backlog of asylum claims, while an increase in staff led to a decrease in the backlog. However, even with more caseworkers employed, productivity, measured by the average number of interviews and decisions, was reported to have declined. The report confirms the detrimental impact of prolonged waiting on unaccompanied children, including damage to their mental and physical health, reduced engagement with professionals, and diminished participation in educational provisions. Beyond the human impact, the report highlights significant financial costs: for every year of delay in decision-making, the Home Office incurs £8,765 per person, with the total annual cost of delays amounting to a

staggering £220 million. This emphasizes the urgent need for a systemic overhaul to create a more efficient and timely process, with resources redirected to build a better-functioning system.

This uncertainty, a protracted state of ambivalence and waiting, appears to be a significant factor in obstructing their agency. The consuming nature of this wait drained their time and energy, diverting focus away from daily living and impacting the quality of their engagement with their surroundings. Participants expressed that this had a negative impact on their mental health. It was also observed that after the Home Office interview, difficult feelings emerged as they revisited their experiences back home and the reasons for seeking asylum. This distress was compounded by the prolonged wait to learn whether they would be permitted to remain in the UK. The waiting added to their emotional burden, intertwined with the anticipation of the final decision after the tremendous effort and risks they had undertaken to seek sanctuary in the UK. While participants experienced an expanded sense of agency when feeling safe, this period of uncertainty hindered that experience, further demonstrating that that agency operates on a continuum (Robson et al., 2004; Abebe, 2019), depending on the specific nature of circumstances. Another useful framework for understanding this experience is the concept of thick and thin agency (Klocker, 2007), which offers insight into individuals acting within restrictive environments versus those acting within a broad range of options. This theme

highlights that, due to the suffocating nature of the waiting and uncertainty, the young people experienced thin agency, as they felt limited in their capacity to act.

Theme 3 – The role of Support systems

The role of support system is a significant theme that provides insight into the experience, expression and evolving nature of agency of young people through their relationships with carers, peers and the broader network. This theme is explored through two sub themes.

Subtheme 1 – Quality of care and Support provided by Carers

The relationships young people forged with their carers, and the quality of the care they received, conveyed warmth, nurturance, and genuine support, which can be seen to have positively impacted and facilitated their agency.

This has come through in various ways.

PP3's described her support workers as kind, caring, and patient. She expressed that while she initially felt she had no one, she now considers them her family.

One instance she recounted was particularly moving, and she became emotional while narrating it:

“When I fell sick, when I sleep in the hospital, it’s difficult time for me. I don’t want to see anyone, I say I don’t want to talk anyone. But they take my responsibility and they bring to me in hospital because I didn’t go to any hospital or no one to care for me. I’m die, I’m not life. I don’t talk, I just not be with you like this now. so difficult time for me. But everything like they do good. I know they are for me, they help me. I don’t have words to them because I’m back to now life. Before I’m not healthy, they do every day check. They do some [participants name], we go hospital. I say no, don’t, I don’t want to. I don’t want speak anyone. I feel I want die like that. But they say no, we are here for you they say to me. Then they give me life. They give me everything. I don’t know how to thankful to them. They help me and they bring me back to before [participant’s name]”

For PP3, the support workers were not merely doing their jobs; they offered her something that she found difficult to articulate and for she struggled to express her gratitude for. During her illness, PP3 expressed having lost her motivation and desire for life, even feeling that she wanted to die. She explained that she did not want to attend her hospital appointments or see or speak to anyone. However, her support workers never considered giving up as an option. They persevered to ensure she received the healthcare and treatment she needed at the time, despite her behaviour towards them and her general lack of drive to engage. PP3 felt that her support workers brought her back to life and helped her reconnect with her former self. They provided something that PP3 was

unable to muster for herself due to her health and its resulting emotional and mental impact. Through this support and the process of overcoming a difficult phase, PP3 experienced improvements in her physical and mental health. She was able to reconnect with her natural self and spirit, becoming more oriented toward life. This suggests a real sense of agency emerge relationally. Abebe's (2019) concept of interdependent agency provides a useful lens for understanding children and young people's agency in this context, as the author emphasizes that it is negotiated and renegotiated through interactions with others and within different contexts over time. Similarly, agency can be understood as having a collective rather than solely individual nature, influenced not only by interactions but also by broader social forces (Toivainen, 2022).

The relevance and significance of seeing agency as relational are evident throughout the themes. The participants expressed the value of foster care as minors and emphasized that the relationship with their carers helped them navigate challenges of the asylum process and the adjust to life in their new country. PP4 for instance advocated that asylum seeking minors should stay with foster families if given the chance, and that in his opinion, it is the best option. PP7 shared that his foster carer looked after him like his own mother, ensuring he was aware that he had the choice to engage in faith-based activities and learning, and that she would support him in whatever he needed. PP7 appreciated the effort his foster carer made to cook food from his home country,

highlighting how this activity became something they enjoyed sharing together. Kohli's (2010) research emphasizes how, for UASCs in foster care, food can represent warmth, replenishment, and access to memories after a turbulent time, while also helping to facilitate a sense of routine and stability in daily life.

Subtheme 2 – Supporting others: Agency in action

This theme represents the support participants felt able to offer others, from a position of being active agents. This act of support highlighted an important dimension of agency, where young people took on roles of leadership, mentorship, and advocacy, demonstrating their ability to influence and shape the experiences of others while affirming their own sense of empowerment and purpose. Not only were they seen attempting to facilitate the agency of others and actively contribute to the community, but this also suggests that their own agency influenced the perceptions they held about themselves, allowing them to see themselves as having the capacities, resources, and experience to support others.

For instance, PP7 was able to empathize with newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees to the country, understanding what it felt being in their position. He therefore took it upon himself to offer whatever kind of support might be helpful, like interpreting, questions about schooling or sharing information to

those in his local area. He also realized the importance of having someone from back home to talk to and find reassurance.

This highlights the need for research into the roles young people might take on in the community, their initiatives, their advocacy. It also calls for a broader perspective that sees them not only as individuals who need support, but also as active, contributing members of society shaping their own life trajectories. Perhaps, beyond the identity of ‘*unaccompanied asylum-seeking children*’.

Theme 4 – The interplay of Status and Agency

As stated in the findings section, participants expressed joy and relief upon having received positive decisions on their asylum claim. This seemed to be directly related to their experience of agency and this is explored through the following subthemes:

Subtheme 1 – Facilitating choices and Agency

All participants had emotional reactions to receiving the decision they had eagerly awaited. They reported feelings of comfort, joy, relief, and a renewed ability to re-engage with daily activities. There was a newfound desire to study, work, and travel, as if a renewed hope and outlook on life had emerged. For

participants, the sense of safety was strengthened, as they felt reassured that this safety would no longer be taken away now that they had received legal confirmation of their right to stay. Some participants described their happiness as surreal, finding it difficult to articulate their emotions and even feeling the urge to cry out of relief. They expressed that they could now sleep peacefully, free from the worries that had plagued them before. The participants felt that this decision opened up new opportunities, such as financial independence, which further enhanced their agency. For example, they now had the ability to decide what food to buy and eat, which leisure and sports activities to participate in, and how to share these experiences with friends. They expressed gratitude for the chance to envision a better life, with possibilities such as access to education, healthcare, and employment.

Participants also highlighted the challenges they faced while seeking asylum, such as not being allowed to work, and noted that this status now opened up that opportunity. For instance, PP6 shared his plans to start his own business with guidance from a mentor, describing this milestone as a significant turning point in his life. While there is a broader discussion to be had about the impact of prohibiting asylum seekers from working and engaging their talents and experience through employment and volunteering in the UK, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (2023) reports that the UK enforces some of the strictest restrictions on the right to work compared to other European nations. The report highlights that allowing asylum seekers to work

would not only improve the wellbeing of those affected but also yield substantial economic benefits, including a £6.7 billion reduction in government expenditure, a £1.6 billion increase in GDP, and boost in tax revenue by £1.3 billion. It is difficult to understand why these figures alone have not been enough to incentivize for the Government to implement effective changes to the system.

Receiving their status i.e., a positive asylum decision and permission to remain in the UK, enhanced the young people's agency by creating new possibilities, both material and immaterial, such as emotional and mental stability. It is important to acknowledge that interviewing young people who had already received their status is likely to have had some conscious and unconscious influence on the overall data. The young people were speaking from a particular position; had they been interviewed while still awaiting a decision on their claim, the data might have been different, potentially impacting the themes that emerged. Furthermore, while obtaining the right to remain in the UK and a successful asylum claim is the goal for all those seeking asylum, there is insufficient research acknowledging and exploring the impact of this status on UASCs and refugees more broadly.

Subtheme 2 – Ongoing constraints on agency

This subtheme captures the complexity of the legal status itself, highlighting that the challenges facing young people do not end with the success of their asylum applications. For instance, PP4 expressed that he had been on the council housing list for five years but still has not been offered a place he can afford. As a result, he has been moving from place to place, temporarily living with friends. This instability has, in turn, affected his ability to secure employment, as employers prefer to hire individuals based locally who can be available on short notice. This provides further evidence that agency exists on a continuum (Robson et al., 2007), is interdependent (Abebe, 2019) and evolves depending on the contexts young people navigate. It also suggests that PP4 is currently experiencing thin agency (Klocker, 2007) in this aspect of his life, as his decisions are shaped by a more restrictive environment.

Additionally, participants' narratives reveal the labelling and dehumanization of refugees, which poses ongoing challenges to their self-worth and how they are perceived in host societies. PP2 noted the difficulty of being equated with individuals who have criminal records or mental health struggles, expressing that she does not feel safe in their company. She questioned why people who sought refuge are being accommodated alongside those who have committed crimes and are perceived as inferior to others in some way. Research indicates that the media often depicts unaccompanied children as criminals and a threat to society (Romero, 2022), perpetuating dehumanizing language. Even

professionals in refugee organizations may hold racist and prejudiced attitudes towards the refugees and asylum seekers they support (Migliarini, 2018). The unfortunate reality is that not feeling valued can create feelings of loneliness and isolation (Herz & Lalander, 2017). The power of labelling, silencing and disregarding voices strips people of their dignity rather than offering them refuge (Berg et al., 2023), further impacting young people's engagement, sense of safety, and agency in such cases.

Family reunification remains an ongoing challenge, even for young people who have been granted permission to remain. Current family reunion laws do not allow child refugees to bring their family members to live with them in the UK (Refugee Council, n.d.; Home Office, 2023). This can be experienced by young people as a constraint on their ability to envision their future lives without the possibility of their family being part of it.

Theme 5 – Personal Transformations

A significant theme that emerged was personal transformation, highlighting how young people gained new perspectives, developed strengths, and underwent profound experiences. These transformations appeared to broaden their sense of agency through a renewed outlook on life and consideration of possibilities they had not previously envisioned.

PP7 noted a significant change in himself and his life after being fostered by a Christian family. They were the first non-Muslims he had interacted with and spent time with so closely. His experience was profound, as it led him to view humanity as the cornerstone of life, rather than focusing solely on his own community. He described his foster family as caring for him as if he were their own, which he initially thought was neither possible nor likely. As he detailed this experience, it strongly suggested that it had altered his perspective on life and possibly influenced how he approaches others and engages with the world moving forward.

PP3 expressed no longer being afraid and had gained confidence in seeking help and speaking her mind. She explained that she was not like this when she first arrived in the UK; she used to be very shy, but that is no longer the case.

Whether it was her language skills or a desire to learn more, she seemed enthusiastic, ready to take on challenges, and eager to approach her future with determination.

PP6 explained that he initially found it difficult to make decisions and felt uninformed when he first arrived. He viewed himself to be weak and young at the time. He reflected that now, he is able to make his own decisions, plan for

the future, and has noticed a significant difference in himself, particularly in how he envisions his own abilities and capacities.

The young people were able to recognize these developments, which can be seen as a thickening of their agency, i.e. agency that has changed to create more layers to their positive experiences. This suggests that this agentic experience has impacted how the young people perceive themselves and their positions in the world. Additionally, these developments can be seen through the lens of Adversity Activated Development (Papadopoulos, 2004; 2006), referring to strengths gained through the refugee experience, traits that they did not have before, on individual and collective level.

4.2.2 Secondary population themes discussion

Through the analysis of data from secondary population participants, three themes emerged. I will now discuss these themes in relation to the research questions and their contribution to understanding the experiences of agency among UASCs and young people.

Theme 1 – Navigating a hostile and disempowering asylum system

As key professionals, the participants had undertaken various roles in supporting asylum seekers and refugees, including UASCs and young people. In their experience, the asylum system is both hostile and disempowering for those seeking support from it. Refugee Action (2022) describes the past decade as one marked by hostility, with the government enabling the UK to become a dangerous place for those seeking safety. Asylum seekers have been met with resentment and cruelty, and the hostile environment and policies have forced many into destitution and homelessness (Pepinster, 2024). This theme has been further divided into subthemes to explore the diverse perspectives that emerged.

Subtheme 1 – Overwhelming complexity and lengthy asylum process

According to the secondary participants, the complexity and enormity of the system can be overwhelming for young people, making it challenging for them to understand and navigate. SP2 describes the system as a "house of falling cards," symbolizing its unsustainable nature, fragility, and lack of accountability. Similarly, Asylum Matters (2020) referred to the UK asylum system as fragmented and fragile. SP2 highlights the brutal limbo period, including having to wait three or four years, being denied the right to work, and receiving incorrect or insufficient information from solicitors and social workers. Fundamental errors, such as incorrect dates of birth on BRPs, lost

records of young people, or the use of incorrect language interpreters for interviews, significantly impact the duration of the process, further illustrating its complexity and intertwined challenges.

SP4 explains that the system is confusing for everyone, including UASCs, and that the journey of claiming asylum, even life after being granted status, is a long and challenging one, making it difficult for young people to navigate. Furthermore, there remains a lack of clarity regarding roles and services for young people, which significantly impacts their daily lives. SP7 states that the asylum system is neither child-friendly nor user-friendly, as it is built upon a long and complex foundation. Crawley's (2010) research highlights the absence of child-sensitive procedures and a specific conceptualization of 'childhood' that undermines USCCs, leaving them unable to articulate their needs or access the protection they are entitled to. Crawley emphasized the need for a child-focused system where UASCs are not only seen as vulnerable and passive victims but also as agents and decision-makers in their own right (2010). Viterbo and Ioffe (2024) point out that positioning children as uniquely vulnerable and deserving of protection inherently juxtaposes adults as less vulnerable and, therefore, less deserving of protection. The authors advocate for the removal of the hierarchical structure of vulnerability and protection, instead promoting a more equitable system.

Subtheme 2 – Barriers to expression and agency

Participants, based on their experiences, have found the asylum system to be controlling, rigid, and domineering, which has significant consequences for young people's ability to express their needs and exercise their agency. They reported that review procedures are ineffective and do not serve the purpose they were created for. SP3 stated that, as a way of exercising agency, some young people escape due to fear of the system. This has also been noted by Missing People and the Children's Society (2024), who highlight that one of the factors contributing to UASCs going missing is their fear of immigration procedures. Other contributing factors include seeking to live with a community they identify with or feel safe in, exploitation, trafficking or re-trafficking, poor relationships with carers, dissatisfaction with their placement, or decreased support during their transition into adulthood. This highlights a vicious cycle in which young people's expression and feedback are disregarded, leaving them feeling compelled to take such actions as possibly the only form of agency available to them. SP3 also emphasized the importance of age-appropriate agency, suggesting that boundaries, rules, and structure should be applied in a manner consistent with what would be appropriate for other young people of their age. SP2 noted that young people's agency is limited within the system, suggesting that it might be more appropriate to consider situational agency to understand their experience. This aligns with relational understandings of

agency, where agency is shaped by the young person's context, situation and interactions with their environment and the people within it. For instance, Frie's (2008) concept of situational agency highlights that agency is contextually and situationally determined.

This theme also highlights the scarcity of resources. According to SP7, "getting access to the right education is a lottery." SP7 explained that, in her experience, not all localities are equipped with provisions such as ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and pathway programs to assist asylum seekers in accessing education. Within such a restrictive framework, SP5 believes that therapy and healing are particularly difficult and complex. Social Work Today (2024) reports that the UK asylum system is damaging to both physical and mental health. Various studies in the trauma studies section 2.5.1 highlight detrimental impact of asylum proceedings on mental health. SP5 further states that choices are limited, and the agency of young people is not respected. This suggests that the system itself acts as a barrier to both agency and recovery.

Participants conveyed an overall sense that young people feel powerless and unheard within the system, which hinders their agency. This includes challenges such as the inability to move into appropriate accommodations and becoming trapped in a cycle of waiting.

Subtheme 3 – Devaluation and Hostility by the asylum system

Tied to a hostile experience, UASCs, young people, and asylum seekers more broadly are not believed by the system, and their dignity and worth are undermined and devalued. Young people are denied their rights, left questioning their identity, and forced to negotiate their age against the system. As a result of repeated negative experiences, they suffer impacts on their self-worth and often develop a fear of the entire asylum process and system.

Dursun and Sauer (2021) highlight the asylum–child welfare paradox affecting UASCs, which is particularly relevant in this context. The authors explain that while child welfare policies aim to improve conditions for unaccompanied minors, they fail to address the systemic issues of the asylum process. Instead, the state uses these policies to maintain and reinforce exclusionary asylum norms under the guise of offering care, leaving unaccompanied youth in a precarious situation, dependent on a system that simultaneously protects and oppresses them.

SP1 reported her disbelief in her interview regarding an unaccompanied young person who was disenrolled from the college program due to low attendance. This occurred despite her having explained to the board about the young person was struggling with mental health issues, was unaccompanied, and had no next of kin to appeal this decision. Despite the UNCRC being ratified in 1991 and

the duty under Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 to act in the best interest of the child and to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, the college failed to understand the circumstances of an unaccompanied youth in this case. The college acted in a way that denied him access to education, something he wished to continue but required more support and understanding to do so. Another fundamental right under the UNCRC is a young person's right to participation. However, in this case, the voice of the young person was not heard.

SP5 referred to the asylum system as a 'system of doubt' rather than a 'system of support', a sentiment reflected in the scenario above. SP5 further reported that professionals often need to present letters to the Home Office as evidence to demonstrate that UASCs and young people are struggling while awaiting their decisions, or to verify other information provided as part of their claim. This practice implies that their experiences are only considered valid when confirmed by a professional. In fact, many, if not all, job roles in the refugee sector include writing support letters, highlighting the sector's heavy reliance on such documentation.

Participants reported that the government normalizes racist and anti-refugee rhetoric, which puts young people at risk and restricts their agency within their surroundings, as was evident during the 2024 riots in England. SP2 emphasized

that it takes significant effort from individuals and communities to counteract these harmful sentiments by fostering a welcoming and supportive environment for young asylum seekers. Furthermore, young people are often dismissed in their interactions with the Home Office or treated insensitively, which can retraumatize them in some cases. For instance, Shock et al., (2015), highlighting how asylum interviews can trigger PTSD intrusions, resulting in poor treatment that adversely affects their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Subtheme 4- Impact of age assessments

Participants expressed concerns about the detrimental impact of age assessments on UASCs. The process was described as vague and intrusive, causing significant stress for both the young person and their foster carers. For instance, SP6 elaborated that, in her foster son's case, authorities had arbitrarily decided he was one year older than he claimed, assigning him a new date of birth. She recounted seeing him cry, something very uncharacteristic of him, and, as a result, she herself felt both upset and angry. Ortiz (2019), an adult working with unaccompanied minors, advocated for a child-centred and rights-based model of age assessments. However, she personally believed that age assessments should not be conducted at all. The author stated that, in her opinion and in the opinion of various others in the field, professionals should operate on the premise that the child is the age they claim to be. Concerns arise

that if children are assessed incorrectly, they may be accommodated inappropriately, without sufficient support, and placed at risk of harm, detention, or deportation (The House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2013, as cited in Ortiz, 2019). Furthermore, no reliable medical method exists for assessing age (British Association of Social Workers, 2015; Doctors of the World, 2015, as cited in Ortiz, 2019). If a young person's age is disputed, it can also negatively impact their relationship and engagement with their social worker. Kenney and Loughry (2018) state that the current age assessment methods in different countries are considered against the international human rights framework, and emphasize that support and services should be provided based on assessed needs and vulnerabilities rather than chronological age.

Another complexity was highlighted by SP3 regarding her experience with age-disputed children, who, in some cases, had been placed in adult accommodation for a year before their claimed age was eventually accepted. SP3 pointed out their struggles, explaining that these young people had to adapt to a certain kind of everyday life, with no college or curfew, only to then transition back to supervised living, attending college on set days and times. This back-and-forth in a young person's life reflects their negotiation of agency and the challenge of make sense of what their age permits. Unaccompanied minor's voices and participation are often disregarded when their age is disputed (Sorvseen, 2018) as evident from the narratives highlighted in this theme. Coram (2019) states

that age is central to identity, and the age assessment process can be damaging for those who are disbelieved. Since age determination is not an exact science, the margin of error can sometimes be as much as five years in either direction, particularly around puberty. This highlights the complexity of these assessments and their subsequent impact on a young person's agency and overall experience.

Based on this emerging theme, I revisited the literature review to expand my discussion on age assessments. Initially, I had introduced age assessment in the context of Home Office procedure, but I had not included a broader analysis or discussion of its implications.

Subtheme 5 – Systemic Reformations

This subtheme highlights participants' views, as reflected in the data, on what they believe is necessary for the asylum system to change and function more effectively. Participants expressed concerns about the lack of essential resources, the constant pressure on organizations, and persistent understaffing, indicating an urgent need for better resource allocation and management. SP2 stated that while the asylum system is beneficial to have in place, the amount of money spent on the Rwanda policy suggests that they could allocate resources more effectively and establish a better system.

The Migration Observatory (2024) reported that, as of July 2024, the Rwanda scheme had cost the government £318 million, based on publicly available information; however, the true costs are likely higher. The report noted that the National Audit Office estimated the UK government could have spent approximately £600 million to send 300 people to Rwanda, equating to around £2 million per person. The enormity of these figures is hard to comprehend, especially given the lack of resources and persistent understaffing reported by participants in this modestly sized sample of interviews.

Participants noted that young people often lacked clarity regarding the roles of professionals, which was a source of confusion for them. One participant suggested that the Guardianship Scheme could be something to consider. The Guardianship Scheme, offered in Scotland, provides specialist support to UASCs by assigning a guardian—a trusted adult who can advocate on the child's behalf and guide them through the complex and confusing welfare, asylum, and legal systems. This support helps young people understand what is happening to them and enables them to actively participate in decisions that affect their lives (Scottish Refugee Council, 2023).

According to participants, key reforms needed for UASCs and young people include improving the quality of legal support, which is not always accessible, addressing the conduct of Home Office officials, tackling the inherently racist nature of the system, and adopting culturally appropriate ways of understanding

the agency and needs of young people. These are significant issues that can only be effectively addressed if systemic change is prioritized. A reformed system could be more effective and allow those accessing it to benefit without experiencing harm. The implications of these changes must be taken seriously, as a well-functioning system directly impacts both the young people it serves and the professionals working within it to provide support and services.

Theme 2 – Fulfilment and Frustration in Refugee Advocacy

What emerged strongly was the participants' sense of meaning and purpose in working with UASCs and young people. Their eagerness and dedication to this work were evident in the narratives and reflections they shared. I believe this directly relates to young people's experience of agency, as the commitment of professionals to their welfare significantly influences how they access opportunities, navigate various aspects of daily life, and develop an overall sense of being supported.

For many participants, working with UASCs and young people initially happened by chance or was intended to be temporary. For example, the increase in UASCs claiming asylum in the UK and subsequently entering educational spaces led participants to engage with them. However, after this experience, many expressed a desire to work with UASCs intentionally. SP3, for instance, transitioned from providing crisis support for UASCs and young people to

working in a charity focused on long-term support, as she wanted to continue building relationships with the young people and make a meaningful difference. Other participants also highlighted the importance of providing support to UASCs, with some choosing proactive and intentional ways to contribute, such as founding a charity organization or forming a collective. Participants expressed a preference for active involvement rather than simply donating, emphasizing their desire to make a tangible difference in areas requiring greater commitment and dedicated work.

Participants described a personal and emotional connection to this work, emphasizing how it has been rewarding, fulfilling, and even empowering. Interestingly, while striving to empower the young people, the professionals themselves experienced a sense of empowerment through their efforts. The quotes in the findings section of this theme illustrate the profound and moving impact this work has had on them. Participants shared how meaningful it felt to build relationships with the young people, describing their work in various roles as one of the most rewarding experiences of their lives. Working closely with or caring for the young people enabled the professional participants to learn, grow, and develop new perspectives, making these experiences deeply enriching. This aligns with Wade et al.'s (2020) research, which highlights foster carers (or, in this case, various key professionals) expressing satisfaction with their caregiving roles. Another aspect of the secondary participants' commitment to

their work emerged through their dedication to and investment in the young people's growth, development, and welfare, as well as the happiness they experienced when witnessing their success. The findings section of this theme illustrates two instances where young people have emerged from their shells, grown positively, come into their own, and appear to be thriving. The participants who shared their observations of this growth seemed absolutely overjoyed by their progress.

This aligns with Kohli's (2006) recognition that emotional commitment is at the heart of effective practice for professionals working with UASCs and young people, emphasizing the importance for young people to experience authority figures positively and with honesty. Similarly, Newbigging and Thomas (2011) state the primary focus of good practice should be the commitment of seeing the wellbeing of children and young people, rather than the demands of immigration policy.

While participants expressed the fulfilling aspects of their experience, which continued to sustain them in these roles, what also emerged were the challenges that accompanied them. Participants felt frustrated and were personally impacted by the young people's difficulties and suffering due to the asylum system. They expressed outrage at the lack of understanding towards young people's predicaments and needs. One participant noted that young people can be so severely impacted by the stress of the process that their behaviour and

mental health can, at times, affect those who work with them. Participants reported that this work carries a high emotional toll, it can be draining, and they often experience burnout. Various studies illustrate the impact on professionals working with asylum seekers, refugees, and forcibly displaced populations. Roberts et al. (2021) found that volunteers working in this sector experience burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS). Naguja et al. (2017) reported that all participants of their study exhibited symptoms of stress and secondary trauma, stemming from excessive workloads, insufficient recovery time, and staff experiencing PTSD symptoms from their own time in war-affected areas. Wilding (2014) noted that aid work is a high-risk profession, with almost 4 out of 5 aid workers experiencing mental health issues (Young, 2015), and up to 30% of humanitarian workers experiencing PTSD symptoms (McEachran, 2014). According to Kocer et al. (2023), volunteers experience more compassion satisfaction and less burnout than professionals; potentially due to workloads and capacities. Additionally their findings indicate that women show higher levels of secondary traumatic stress than men. The authors emphasizes that tailored interventions are necessary for people working in such fields. This highlights the need for increased attention and resources to support professionals in the field, whose work is crucial to maintaining the functioning of refugee charity organizations.

Theme 3 – Realities of working with a complex needs population

This theme illustrates the daily challenges of working with unaccompanied minors and young people, who have multifaceted needs. It highlights how the participants adapted and responded to complex issues to meet these unique needs and support young people, which in turn influenced their sense of agency. The needs ranged from cultural considerations to mental health and developmental needs. However, some participants noted that addressing the emotional needs of the young people was challenging within their own roles and capacities. For instance, SP7 observed that the theme of trauma emerged in her research, along with how young refugee children felt that those working with them avoided talking about their past. Through the children's narratives, the participant shared that the children often wondered whether the workers were uninterested in learning more about them or simply didn't care. The participant also questioned the hesitation among workers in approaching potentially difficult conversations. We can speculate that the reasons for this may include a lack of training and support in social work practice (Robinson, 2014), which likely extends to other professionals such as foster carers and caseworkers. Kohli (2006) observed that social workers (or other professionals, in this context) choose how they wish to practice and the level of connection they seek to build with the young people to effectively perform their roles. Robinson (2014) and Larkin (2015) also observed that professionals often struggle with feelings of powerlessness and frustration in their roles when working with vulnerable young people. This may affect how professionals

engage with young people or how they are perceived by them. However, more focused research on this topic would be beneficial to better understand the challenges professionals face in engaging with young people. SP7 offers an insight into this complexity, explaining that while professionals want to provide support, they often do not feel adequately equipped to address young people's emotional and mental health needs. Hadwin and Singh (2025) note that the reality of working in the social care field is highly complex, as practitioners are not confined to the binary framework of welfare and immigration. Instead, they navigate ethical dilemmas related to the welfare of children and young people while simultaneously facing restrictive immigration policies.

What emerged was that professionals often held dual roles and responsibilities. For instance, SP2 noted that the needs of UASCs and young people accessing ESOL or step-up programs were both pastoral and academic. Their needs could range from practical support, such as obtaining bus passes, to mental health support, in addition to the teaching support provided in SP2's role. The complexity of these needs suggests that to be truly effective, one must consider the young person's holistic needs. If they are unable to travel to and from classes, the teaching cannot take place; therefore, their needs are deeply interconnected. Working in the refugee sector, professionals come to realize through experience that the work involves addressing complex needs. For instance, mental health professionals cannot effectively address a young

person's mental health if the young person is facing accommodation or food insecurity. Understanding and addressing these fundamental needs becomes essential. I was unable to locate research that explicitly outlines this connection. However, SP5 states, *“I think offering therapy to this population becomes really complex from the perspective that therapy almost comes across as a luxury when basic needs and safety are not met”*.

Further complexity in this work is evident in fostering roles, where participants emphasized the need for flexibility to work effectively with young people. Cultural differences in placements may also play a role, as illustrated by SP7's example, where one young person's placement broke down due to having a British foster carer. However, this may not necessarily be the only factor influencing the success of placements. For instance, according to Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh (2015), young people valued the personality and nature of their carers regardless of cultural background. Moreover, the research noted that cross-cultural placements were effective when carers valued diversity and were committed to the young person's development.

Other complex challenges participants faced included navigating conversations around religious and cultural beliefs, such as discussing the acceptance of LGBTQ+ friends of foster carers. Other examples included educating young people about financial literacy, an essential skill for when they leave placements, and demonstrating the foster carers' efforts to facilitate their agency

through practical learning. One participant shared that in their work with a young person, they focused on encouraging the young person to complete tasks independently, with their support, as a way to promote their development and facilitate independence. The complexity arose when the young person felt that SP3 didn't care about them. SP3 explained that although it would have been quicker and easier to complete the task for the young person, they saw it as a learning opportunity. However, this intention was not received in the way it was intended.

Some participants chose to deepen their understanding and enhance good practice by undertaking additional training in the field, such as Refuge Care degrees. However, it is important to acknowledge that not everyone has access to such opportunities, and that organisations should take responsibility for offering trainings and support to staff. Another participant highlighted the lack of appropriate training for foster carers working with unaccompanied children of different faiths. SP6 emphasized the need for such training to be introduced, as it would be highly valuable. Other challenges included conducting research with refugees and young people, with recruitment remaining a significant issue. SP7 noted that personal networks are crucial when conducting research. SP7 also pointed out that factors such as race, age, and background can become significant when working with or researching asylum-seeking and refugee populations. This presents yet another potential area for research: the impact of

race and gender on working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people, and how this manifests in professional roles and relationships.

4.2.3 Synthesizing Perspectives: An Integrated Discussion of Findings from Primary and Secondary Participants

Data from both sets of participants, the young people and the professionals who have worked with young people in different capacities, have provided valuable insights that have enriched the understanding of young people's experience of agency while seeking asylum in the UK. This section explores how the themes from both sets complement each other.

The young people, as primary participants, shared their individual experiences and described what the journey of seeking asylum has been like for them. The professionals, as secondary participants, spoke about their experiences of working with multiple unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people over many years. They have worked in various roles and supported these young people in different capacities. The interaction and connection between these two sets of emerging themes highlight unique individual stories while also providing a broader perspective on how agency manifests for the young people. For instance, the period of uncertainty experienced by the young people aligns with the professionals' observations of the asylum system as a lengthy and

complex process. Not only did the young people experience arbitrary long waits in their own cases, but the professionals also witnessed many young people over the years feeling stuck during this time. Witnessing this over many years has led the professionals to critique the confusing and complex nature of the asylum system, which is challenging for adults, let alone children and young people, to navigate. The delays, systemic errors, lack of clarity about roles, and the resulting distress restrict young people's agency. Addressing these issues requires improving the system's efficiency through better resource allocation, employing sufficient number of trained caseworkers, demystifying the process, and incorporating input from experienced professionals in the field to inform policy and practice. These measures could help mitigate the connection between uncertainty and systemic barriers.

A crucial element that emerges is the significance of the support young people receive and the connections they form through their interactions and relationships with carers and key professionals, highlighting the relational aspect of agency. The support and care provided have had a profound impact on the young people in this research, enhancing their agency by helping them feel supported, access opportunities, and act with a sense of empowerment in various ways. As evidenced, the professionals have derived fulfilment from this work despite its challenges. The growth and personal transformations of the young people bring joy and inspiration to the professionals, while the young

people, in turn, gain empowerment through the professionals' support. This dynamic illustrates the interdependent nature of agency in this context. This is further demonstrated by young people seizing opportunities to offer support to others, whether within their refugee communities or through broader volunteering initiatives. These actions reflect the agentic behaviours of the young people. Furthermore, professionals were also seen as enablers of safety for young people and therefore by extension, their agency.

The complexity of the everyday challenges in working with young people is evident, as they present with multifaceted needs that professionals must navigate within their roles. This reflects that when professionals and key workers are limited in their capacities due to structural constraints, the agency of the young people is also restricted. Contributing to these structural constraints are hostile, racist, and anti-refugee sentiments that have become embedded in the functioning of the asylum system. Professionals who support young people are, in many ways, the cornerstone of this work, making it crucial to invest in them to ensure that the conditions and support provided to these young people are efficient, empathetic, and robust.

In this thesis, young people's agency can be understood as relational and dynamic, existing on a continuum that shifts depending on the context. It can be restricted or enhanced based on the situation, their actions, and their interacting with others. While the system restricts young people's agency in certain

situations, it has also enhanced their agency in others, illustrating both the enabling and constraining impacts of the system.

During one of my interactions with an immigration officer at Heathrow Airport upon my return to the UK, he asked me what I was studying. Upon learning that I work and conduct research with asylum seekers and refugees, he candidly remarked, "Oh, you could be my boss here!" It was interesting to hear that. It's important to acknowledge and utilize the expertise of individuals in the field to build a more effective and mindful asylum system. While the process is complex, lengthy, and under-resourced, it still serves a purpose, and it exists for a reason. The young people were grateful for the safety and opportunities they have been able to access, and it should be a collective priority to help realize the system's full potential. There must be sufficient funding for refugee charities, which employ professionals who work tirelessly with young people. It is essential to ensure that critical services are in place for UASCs and young people. For instance, a couple of weeks before the submission of this thesis, a foster carer asked me if there were any local counselling services available for UASCs. A useful and relevant project that had been running locally ended because it could not secure funding, highlighting the continued need for specialist services.

It is also crucial to include young people's voices in the development and functioning of services. Effective training should be established and adequately funded for staff working with refugee populations to ensure they understand these complex needs without pathologizing them. Additionally, the government needs to consider allowing asylum-seeking populations to work in the country, as I have noted previously. This policy could not only contribute to the country's economy and development but also enhance people's agency, self-worth, and overall well-being.

4.2.4 Limitations

Limitations of Semi Structured Interviews

According to Adams (2015), interviews are time-consuming, labour-intensive, and require interviewer sophistication, which entails being attentive, sensitive, poised, and knowledgeable about the relevant subject matter. Furthermore, the process of preparing, setting up, conducting, and analysing interviews is neither quick nor easy. The time and effort required to conduct interviews thoroughly and accurately are considerable. Semi-structured interviews, in particular, often involve the challenging task of analysing large volumes of qualitative data, including extensive transcripts (Adams, 2015).

Transcribing interviews was a lengthy and detail-oriented process, requiring careful listening and multiple replays of certain segments to ensure accuracy in

capturing words and phrases. In later interviews, the transcripts were auto-generated via the video platform; however, these still required manual cross-checking, as variations in accents and voice clarity sometimes led to inaccuracies in transcription. Although interviews demand significant time, concentration, and meticulous attention to detail, from data collection to dissemination, this method was well-suited to generating rich, in-depth insights from participants.

Another limitation of interviews and qualitative research is social desirability bias, which refers to an individual's tendency to present themselves and their social context in a socially acceptable manner than fully reflecting their reality. In research, this bias can create a discrepancy between participants' authentic perceptions and the way they choose to present them to researchers (Bergen & Labonté, 2019).

In this study, I made a conscious effort to communicate that the research aimed to explore participants' lived experiences and perspectives rather than a researcher-driven analysis. This approach was intended to help participants feel at ease in expressing themselves openly and to reinforce that their voices were central to the study. Bergen and Labonté (2019) suggest that while social desirability bias cannot be completely eliminated, it can be minimized through clear introductions to the research, careful questions, and rapport-building, all of which I actively incorporated into the interview process.

Limitations of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

While thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used method, its flexibility can also present challenges in maintaining consistency and coherence (Holloway & Todres, 2003). This was particularly relevant to my research, as capturing the nuanced experiences of unaccompanied young people and professionals required an approach that was both rigorous and reflexive. Additionally, thematic analysis has been critiqued for offering less structured methodological guidance compared to approaches like grounded theory, which can create uncertainty in its application (Nowell et al., 2017).

A key limitation is the risk of prematurely forming themes or merely summarizing topics rather than identifying deeper patterns of meaning (Braun et al., 2022). Given the sensitive and complex nature of the data in this study, I was particularly mindful of this risk and ensured that themes emerged organically rather than being prematurely categorized. To mitigate this, I engaged in ongoing reflexive exploration, re-reading transcripts multiple times, and allowing ideas to percolate over time (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Furthermore, the subjectivity inherent in thematic analysis means that researcher bias can influence how themes are interpreted. To enhance credibility and consistency, I explicitly applied my epistemological position (constructivist/social constructivist) and research values, ensuring that thematic development aligned with participants' lived experiences rather than imposing

external interpretations (Holloway & Todres, 2003, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017). Triangulation was used, which is a method used to test and increase the validity of qualitative research through the convergence of information from different sources (Carter et al., 2014). 'Investigator triangulation' involves the participation of two or more researchers to provide multiple observations and conclusions, which can help confirm findings, offer different perspectives, and add breadth to the phenomena of interest (Denzin, 1978, as cited in Carter et al., 2014). In my research, I incorporated peer discussion and supervisor feedback as a form of investigator triangulation to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings. Anonymised sections of selected transcripts were shared with a peer researcher to gain input and feedback on the codes and themes that emerged from the data. This process allowed me to confirm that the data I considered relevant to the research question were also viewed as relevant and meaningful by the peer researcher, ensuring that important elements were not overlooked in the analysis. Similarly, I engaged closely with supervisor feedback to reflect critically on the relevance and coherence of the emerging themes and their connection to the data. This helped counter potential personal bias and ensured that the analysis and interpretation remained grounded in participants' voices.

Despite these challenges, thematic analysis was well-suited to this study, as it provided a flexible yet structured framework for understanding how young people and professionals conceptualized their experience within the asylum

system. Its ability to capture both explicit and latent meanings made it a valuable tool for exploring the depth of participants' narratives in a way that other methodologies might not have allowed.

4.3 Added Value of the Study

As part of the research process, while some participants reported a neutral experience of participation, for instance, “It was fine” or “the questions were easy”, some of the participants reported it being a positive experience implying therapeutic benefits. A few examples:

‘It’s been good actually. I feel comfortable actually’ PP2

‘It’s good. To be honest, it’s very nice. Because someone to know your what happened to you and what’s going on when you come this country. What happened before and now. what’s changed in your life. Because before and after it’s so different. It’s good like, it’s nice. ‘ PP3

‘It was good, you know, is good to know, like, obviously I have these things in my mind. But I can't do anything about it. but I'm telling you, and in a sort of way, might get changed and like things might get better. I'm not saying that necessarily what I'm thinking about is better. But people, obviously there'll be a

lot of people thinking similar sort of thing, but they can't say it to anyone. If you see what I mean. It's interesting. I've never been a sort of project like this before. It's quite interesting for me.''' PP7

These participants indicated that sharing their experiences with someone and having the opportunity to think and talk through their journey served as an important mode of self-expression. While the interviews were primarily a tool for data collection, they also appeared to facilitate a sense of agency among the young people. This highlights the potential for research to actively support and promote the agency of young people, with this project serving as an example of such facilitation in real time. This serves as a helpful reminder for gatekeepers and professionals working with young people to carefully consider the potential benefits of informing them about research opportunities.

Regarding the secondary population, participants found the interviews to provide a unique reflective space and emphasized the importance of research to enhance understanding of working with unaccompanied young people. Some of their reflections are as follows:

'I enjoy talking about it and enjoy reflecting on what's happened. A lot of it is about my family so who doesn't love talking about their family and telling you how great my kids are. I have enjoyed it. the emotional bit is not a surprise to

me, it's not like I haven't reflected on them before. I do find it quite enjoyable thinking about this.''' SP6

'And it's really, I think for me, it's really nice to like, have things that make you take that time to like be a bit more reflective.''' SP3

'It's interesting its quite thought provoking. It's quite interesting as well because you were asking me about what motivated me to teach and things and I am thinking about my roles going forward as well.''' SP1

Overall, the methodology provided valuable insights into the experiences of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. The qualitative approach enabled a rich exploration of their agency and the complexities of their lived experiences, capturing perspectives from both the young people and the professionals who work with them.

Beyond its role in data collection, the methodology also created a reflective space for participants. For the young people, the interviews served as a platform for self-expression, not only contributing to the research findings but also fostering a sense of agency and empowerment. Similarly, for the professionals, the interviews offered an opportunity to reflect on their roles and contributions, underscoring the importance of this research in deepening understanding and practice.

5.CONCLUSION

5.1 Key findings

In this research, the central aim was to explore if and how agency is experienced by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in the UK throughout the asylum process, until leave to remain is granted. Specifically, the study sought to understand what these experiences of agency look like, how and which factors contribute to or hinder the development of agency during this period. Additionally, the research aimed to explore the role of agency in shaping the overall self-perception of these young people.

The primary research questions guiding this research were:

1. How is agency experienced, if at all, by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and young people until leave to remain is granted?

This question explored whether and how UASCs experience a sense of agency while navigating the asylum system.

2. What are the possible facilitators in young people gaining a sense of agency during the asylum claim?

This question examined the factors that helped and facilitated young people's sense of agency during their asylum claim.

3. What are the possible barriers, if any, that lead to the loss of agency among UASC and young people during the asylum claim?

This part of the research focused on identifying the challenges or barriers that may diminish young people's agency and their ability to assert control over their lives.

4. What role does agency play in the overall perception young people hold of themselves, and how has this perception been formed?

This question sought to understand how young people's sense of agency might contribute to their self-image and how their experiences throughout the asylum process might influence their view of themselves.

The findings of the research revealed five key themes from the primary participant dataset:

1. The Path to Safety: A crucial theme of seeking safety and the feeling of safety that shaped young people's experiences and agency.

This theme was divided into three subthemes:

Unsafe Circumstances at Home: Context of young people's experience that led to their departure from their home countries.

Perilous Journey: Highlights the adversities faced by young people on their journey to the UK.

Safe Haven: Safety and Security in the UK: The sense of safety and security experienced upon arrival in the UK.

2.Period of Uncertainty: This theme reflects the prolonged and ambivalent wait endured by young people for their asylum claims to be processed, and how this impacted them.

3.The Role of Support Systems: This theme offers insight into young people's agency as it develops through the support they receive and the relationships they have with carers and key professionals.

This theme was subdivided into two subthemes:

Quality of care and support provided by carers: This subtheme highlights the importance of quality of care through support, nurturance, and genuine concerns for the young people's welfare and best interests.

Agency in Action: This subtheme represents the support that young people were able to offer others.

4.Interplay of Status and Agency: this theme captures the connection between their agency and the status received.

This theme encompasses two subthemes:

Facilitating Choices and Agency: The ways in which the status of the young person has facilitated their agency, enabling opportunities.

Ongoing Constraints on Agency: Factors that continued to restrict the agency of young people, despite the status received.

5. Personal Transformations: This theme explores how the asylum journey and related experiences influenced personal development, and personal changes noted by young people.

The findings from the secondary participant dataset revealed three key themes, which were further divided into several subthemes:

1. Navigating a Hostile and Disempowering Asylum System

This theme captures how the asylum system is a hostile and disempowering experience for young people seeking support from it, in the views of professionals working with young people.

The subthemes include:

Overwhelming Complexity and Lengthy Asylum Process: Participants expressed the complexity and enormity of the system, as well as its tremendously long process.

Barriers to Expression and Agency: This subtheme highlights the obstacles that young people face in voicing their needs and exercising their agency within the system.

Devaluation and Hostility by the Asylum System: Professionals noted how the system often undermines the value and dignity of young asylum seekers, leading to a loss of agency.

Impact of Age Assessments: This subtheme highlighted the role of age assessments in shaping young people's experiences and the impact on their agency. Many professionals expressed concerns about the inaccuracies and harms caused by these assessments.

Systemic Reforms: This subtheme reflects on the need for systemic change and the ways in which professionals believe the asylum system could be reformed to empower young people rather than disempower them.

2. **Fulfilment and Frustration in Refugee Advocacy:** This theme captures both the meaning and fulfilment they gain from advocating and working with young asylum seekers and refugees as well as personal impact of this work.

3. **Realities of Working with a Complex Needs Population:** This theme addresses the everyday challenges professionals faced in their roles working with UASCs and young people, and how they negotiate the multifaceted needs they present.

With regard to the first research question, *How is agency experienced, if at all, by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and young people?* – These young people do experience agency while seeking asylum in the UK, but the nature of this agency appears to be relational, interdependent, and shifts along a continuum, i.e. agency shifts and changes dependent on one's circumstances. It appears to be shaped by the specific context they find themselves in, including factors such as their immediate situation, the environment they are in, and the people they interact with.

With regard to the second research question, *What are the possible facilitators in young people gaining a sense of agency during the asylum claim?* – Factors such as safety, quality of care, and relationships with carers, as well as receiving legal status, contribute to the facilitation of young people's agency within the asylum system. Additionally, the fulfilment professionals find in their work advocating for young people, along with the dedication and commitment they show towards the young people's growth and welfare, contributes significantly as a facilitator of their agency. It was also noted that young people, by experiencing agency themselves, were able to offer support to others.

With regard to the third research question, *What are the possible barriers, if any, that lead to the loss of agency among UASC and young people during the asylum claim?* – Several factors contribute to the restriction of agency, including the period of uncertainty, ongoing constraints despite receiving legal

status, the hostile, disempowering, and complex nature of the asylum system, age assessments, and the restricted agency of professionals. The complexity and lack of support and resources available to professionals also limit their ability to effectively support young people. Together, these factors narrow young people's options and hinder their ability to exercise agency.

With regard to the fourth research question, *What role does agency play in the overall perception young people hold of themselves, and how has this perception been formed?* – It was noted that, through experiencing agency during their time in the UK, young people were able to observe positive developments in their self-perception. For instance, they described becoming more confident compared to being shy upon arrival, feeling personally transformed through intimate interactions with foster carers of different faiths, and ultimately experiencing a change in their outlook on life. They also mentioned being able to make their own decisions about everyday matters, as well as significant decisions, such as starting a new business, something they reported not being able to imagine at one point. These experiences highlighted how young people felt more competent, thoughtful, and confident, gaining strengths and perspectives that positively transformed their outlook on life.

A key consideration emerging from this study is the role of agency as a therapeutic dimension in the experiences of young asylum seekers and refugees. While this research highlights its significance, further studies can explore its

practical application in services and policies. Integrating this perspective could provide a more holistic lens understanding the need to foster environments to enhance and facilitate agency.

5.2 Contribution to knowledge and Refugee Care

This research aimed to contribute to knowledge in the field of Refugee Care by addressing the under-researched area of exploring agency within the context of refugees and asylum seekers, specifically focusing on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people in the UK. It highlights the ongoing adversities faced by young people and emphasizes that their experiences cannot be understood in binaries. It is not the case, as often believed, that asylum-seeking young people have no agency within the system. This has allowed us to uncover experiences that go beyond the trauma and pathology lens, offering a broader perspective.

This study has deepened our understanding of agency, by contextualizing it within the experiences of unaccompanied young people, and has shed light on what these experiences of agency look like. It also explores the factors that facilitate and limit this experience, and how agency contributes to shaping their lives. It emphasizes the importance of supporting young people appropriately through services and activities that expand their agency, and highlights the critical role of professionals who work with UASCs and young people, emphasizing the quality of care and the relationships they can build. In this

regard, this research also considers agency as a therapeutic dimension to take into account when working with young asylum-seeking and refugee populations. This study highlights its significance and potential relevance in this sector, which can be further explored in future research.

The findings offer valuable insights into conducting research with young people in this field. While this was not the primary aim of the study, the research has highlighted important methodological considerations. The need to include and collaborate with young people remains high, prompting us to think more deeply about their rights to participation, agency in research, the negotiation of protective intentions and the importance of incorporating young people's views and participation.

5.3 Implications for Clinical Practice and Policy

The findings from this study have several important implications for clinical practice and policy development concerning unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.

Recognising Agency as a Therapeutic Dimension

This research highlights the importance of recognising agency as a therapeutic dimension. Clinical practitioners, social workers, and carers working with UASCs and young people could benefit from approaches that actively foster

young people's agency, for instance, by creating and offering meaningful choices, and encouraging participation in decisions affecting their lives. This may contribute positively to young people's psychological wellbeing and development.

Enhancing Quality of Care and Relational Support

The quality of care received by young people emerged as a crucial factor in facilitating their agency. There is value in providing carers and key professionals with training and support that emphasises relational care, consistency, and attentiveness to young people's agency within everyday interactions. Future policy frameworks for UASCs and young people may benefit from incorporating relational and agency-promoting practices as indicators of high-quality care.

Addressing Structural Barriers to Agency within the Asylum System

The findings highlight the disempowering impact of prolonged uncertainty, complex bureaucratic processes, and restrictive age assessments on young people's agency. It is important that policy reforms consider ways to streamline asylum procedures for young people, improve transparency in decision-making, and develop more equitable and respectful processes. Systems that strengthen, rather than undermine, young people's ability to make choices and influence their lives are crucial.

Intercultural and Intersectional Approaches to Support

The experiences shared by participants highlighted how agency is shaped by intersecting factors such as age, gender and legal status. Clinical and support services could be strengthened by adopting intercultural approaches that recognise different cultural understandings of agency. Mental health and psychosocial support for young refugees should be responsive to the diverse realities young people bring, rather than assuming uniform experiences or needs.

Youth Participation in Service and Policy Development

This research reinforces the importance of meaningful youth participation in research and design and evaluation of services. Rather than viewing young people as passive recipients of care, greater efforts could be made to involve them as active contributors in shaping the systems and services that affect their lives. Encouraging spaces for young people's voices may not only support their sense of agency but also strengthen service relevance and effectiveness.

Overall, embedding these considerations within clinical practice and policy development may help create environments that foster young people's agency, wellbeing, and growth, contributing to more humane and responsive systems of support.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

While the insights from participants were valuable, the research was limited to a total of 14 participants. The challenges faced during the recruitment process have been detailed in the methodology section. Therefore, this sample size cannot be used to generalize the findings to the otherwise diverse group of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. The attempt was not to arrive at a generalization, but rather shine a light onto young people's experiences. The primary participant group included two females and five males, but it was still not representative, for example, of young people with disabilities.

The study included young people who had received a positive decision on their asylum claims and were therefore granted status. This selection criterion may have had an unintended secondary effect of shaping the sample toward those who were relatively "successful" within the asylum system, i.e., individuals who had secured legal status, remained in the country for a longer period, and often had greater access to support services. As a result, the ways in which agency was described and understood in the data may reflect a particular trajectory of relative stability and success. Had the study included young people who were still awaiting decisions, or who had experienced negative outcomes, the portrayal of agency might have been markedly different, potentially highlighting greater vulnerability, uncertainty, or constrained agency.

Furthermore, if this had been a longitudinal study, it could have provided different insights or allowed the potential for observing agency as a continuum in real time during the research process.

The study was unable to include young people who did not speak English, as the interviews were conducted in English. This excluded young people who could have participated with the presence of language interpretation. This could have led to further deliberation around the impact of interpreters in interviews and the research process.

The inclusion criteria for young people's participation required them to be 18 years old, which excluded the experiences and perspectives of younger unaccompanied individuals. It is important to acknowledge the value of incorporating children's perspectives in research and to consider the most appropriate methods for doing so.

The results do not contribute to understanding the experiences of young individuals in nations lacking formal asylum processes.

Although the secondary participants occupied different roles within the refugee care sector, all were female, which meant that male perspectives within the professional community were absent. The lack of gender diversity may have limited the breadth of views on the challenges and relational dynamics involved in working with young asylum seekers and refugees. A more balanced

representation of gender among participants could have revealed different themes.

In addition, all participants were of white British or European backgrounds, resulting in limited racial and ethnic representation. Including professionals from a broader range of ethnic backgrounds could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of refugee care practices and how professional identities influence support for young people.

5.5 Suggestions for future research:

The ideas as well as limitations that have emerged from this thesis have contributed to suggestions for further research, which include:

- Unaccompanied children's experiences in countries that are non-signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, lack formal asylum processes, or follow significantly different procedures. I would personally be interested in doing this research in the context of India, where I am from.
- The exploration and impact of interfaith experiences between UASCs and their foster carers.

- Examining the roles and societal engagement of former unaccompanied young people.
- Adversity-Activated Development among unaccompanied young people. This can be a longitudinal study from the time of arrival till their asylum decision.
- Co-creating a research and practical project with unaccompanied young people.

Concluding remarks

Given the ongoing global humanitarian crises, people seeking asylum remains an enduring phenomenon. It is crucial to consider how to make the asylum system more effective, ensuring it upholds the rights of children, young people, and, of course, adults and families. This research has been enlightening, particularly through the interactions I had with both young people and professionals. The research process itself also tested my own agency as a researcher requiring me to navigate a process that is seldom fully predictable. Meeting expectations often demanded adaptability, ultimately contributing to a steep learning curve. Through these experiences, I have gained valuable insights, which have kept me motivated and driven to inform my contributions as a mental health practitioner and a researcher to the field of Refugee Care.

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Appendix A – Primary Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Project title

Towards understanding the experiences of agency of unaccompanied asylum-seeking Children and Young People in the UK

My name is Shireen Dossa and I am a PhD student in the Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

This is a post graduate research with the aim to understand the lived experiences of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children in the United Kingdom. This is to highlight voices of the young people and listen to the perspectives, opinions and stories of young people themselves. This is also intended to understand the impact the asylum process can cause on the well-being of unaccompanied minors so as something to learn and improve from. The research will conclude in 2025 and would like to interview young people of 18 years and above who have gained their Leave to Remain status.

10 young people will be invited to reflect and share their recent experience of the asylum process. For safeguarding and ethical concerns, young people who have already received their status in the last 3-5 years are invited to participate.

Why have I been invited to participate?

If you are a young person aged 18 years or above who has received the Leave to Remain Status in the last 3-5 years, and are willing to share your experience of the asylum process and your journey, you are welcome to participate in this study.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to take part in this research study. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to provide oral/written consent. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

In order to withdraw, you can contact me at any time via email sd19827@essex.ac.uk or phone xxxxx6160. Any information you have provided till then, can be deleted and not used for the research.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you (the participant) will be asked to answer a few questions as part of an interview. Depending on your comfort and convenience, the interview can last up to one hour and can be divided in two meetings. I, Shireen, will be the interviewer and will be collecting your data i.e. the answers you provide to the questions.

The interviews will be held online, either via telephone or video call.

It will be your decision whether you would give consent to be recorded or not. If you choose to not be recorded, I would like to take notes of the answers you give. If you do wish to be recorded, the data will be stored securely and confidentially and deleted once the research is over.

You are encouraged to share as much or as little as you want during the interviews. It is important you understand that it is completely your wish to share your experience.

The information you provide will be anonymized in the research. That means your name, age, gender, country will all be changed. You can even decide yourself what you would like it to be changed to. Any research articles for journals written from this thesis will also be anonymized.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The research will involve one or two meetings lasting an hour depending on the comfort of the participant.

In case you feel any distress or discomfort talking about your experience, you can be signposted to relevant organisations for support.

Samaritans – 116 123

Baobab Centre for young survivors in exile – 02072631301

Refugee Council - 02073466700 or info@refugeecouncil.org.uk

Freedom from Torture- 02076977777

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your contribution by sharing your story would be highly valuable in understanding the experience of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the United Kingdom. This would be informative in understanding the needs and concerns of the young people and would be a valuable contribution to the field. This research also aims to understand the experience of COVID 19 and the impact that might have had on your asylum claim if you received it after the lockdown or its effect on your well-being over all.

Will my information be kept confidential?

The information you provide is **confidential** and has no impact on the status you have received. The information you provide will be anonymised for the research and you can even choose the different name, country and age you would like to be used in place of your own.

It will be your decision whether you would give consent to be recorded or not. If you choose to not be recorded, I would like to take notes of the answers you give. If you do wish to be recorded, the data will be stored securely and confidentially and deleted once the research is over which is in 2025. No one except me (the researcher) will have access to the information

you provide during the course of the interview. The paper notes will be transcribed and the details along with audio/video recordings will be stored in the University's Box Cloud Storage. The files will be deleted permanently from the hard drive post completion and acceptance of the thesis.

During the course of one or the two meetings, if you share any information that might indicate that you are at risk of harm or someone else is at risk of harm with what you have disclosed, the researcher will be legally liable to report it. This will be discussed with the participant and they will be informed of how this procedure would take place.

What is the legal basis for using the data and who is the Data Controller?

The Data Controller will be the University of Essex and the contact will be University Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk).

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you feel you are interested and would like to take part in the research, please contact me via email at sd19827@essex.ac.uk or message/call at this number xxxxx36160

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the study will be shared in the thesis which will be submitted to the University of Essex. None of the information in the research will be identifiable to any participant.

If you would like to read the results and the research, you can contact me on the details given below and I can provide you a copy.

Who has reviewed the study?

This research study has gained ethical approval by Ethics Sub Committee 2 at the University of Essex.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the principal investigator of the project, Shireen Dossa, using the contact details below. If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the University's Research Integrity Manager, Dr Mantalena Sotiriadou (e-mail ms21994@essex.ac.uk) If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Information Assurance Manager (e-mail dpo@essex.ac.uk). Please include the ERAMS reference which can be found at the foot of this page.

Contact Details for the Researcher –

Shireen Dossa, student at The University of Essex, Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies.

Email – sd19827@essex.ac.uk

Work Phone – xxxxx6160

PhD Supervisor – Zibiah A Loakthar

Email – z.loakthar@essex.ac.uk

Appendix B – Primary Participant consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Towards understanding the experiences of agency of unaccompanied asylum-seeking Children and Young People in the UK

Researcher: **Shireen Dossa**, University of Essex^{[L][SEP]}

Contact:^{[L][SEP]} e-mail sd19827@essex.ac.uk **Telephone** xxxxx6160

I _____, agree to take part in this research focusing on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK.

The details of the research have been explained to me in _____ language.

Shireen has explained her research to me and I understand what it is about. I understand that

- Everything I say will be **confidential**. That means that Shireen will **not pass on any information** I don't wish to share without my consent, unless she has **serious** concerns about my wellbeing.^{[L][SEP]}
- I can decide **not to take part** in the research **at any stage**.
- Similarly, I can decide to **withdraw my data** at any time.^{[L][SEP]}
- I can decide if what I say can be **recorded** or not.
- My identity will be **anonymised** and I can choose my own pseudonym.^{[L][SEP]}
- This has **nothing to do with my asylum claim** and will have **no impact** on the asylum process.^{[L][SEP]}
- This will **not affect** the status that I have already achieved.
- It will also not affect the services I receive from any organisation that I am in touch with.

Participant Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix C – Secondary Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Project title

Towards understanding the experiences of agency of unaccompanied asylum-seeking Children and Young People in the UK

My name is Shireen Dossa and I am a PhD student in the Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

This is a doctoral research with the aim to understand the lived experiences of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children in the United Kingdom. This is to highlight voices of the young people and listen to the perspectives, opinions and stories of young people themselves. This is also intended to understand the impact the asylum process can cause on the well-being of unaccompanied minors so as something to learn and improve from. The research will conclude in 2025 and would like to interview young people of 18 years and above who have gained their Leave to Remain status.

Why have I been invited to participate?

If you are a professional aged 18 years or above who has worked with unaccompanied children and young people, and are willing to share your experience and knowledge of working with the population, you are welcome to participate in this study.

Participation in this research is completely **voluntary**. It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to take part in this research study. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to provide written consent. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

In order to withdraw, you can contact me at any time via email sd19827@essex.ac.uk or work phone xxxxx6160. Any information you have provided till then, can be deleted and not used for the research.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you (the participant) will be asked to answer a few questions as part of an interview. Depending on your comfort and convenience, the interview can last up to one hour and can be divided in two meetings. I, Shireen, will be the interviewer and will be collecting your data i.e. the answers you provide to the questions.

The interviews will be held online, either via telephone or video call.

It will be your decision whether you would give consent to be recorded or not. If you choose to not be recorded, I would like to take notes of the answers you give. If you do wish to be recorded, the data will be stored securely and confidentially and deleted once the research is over.

You are encouraged to share as much or as little as you want during the interviews. It is important you understand that it is completely your wish to share your experience.

The information you provide will be anonymized in the research. That means your name, age, gender, country will all be changed. You can even decide yourself what you would like it to be changed to. Any research articles for journals written from this thesis will also be anonymized.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The research will involve one or two meetings lasting an hour depending on the comfort of the participant.

In case you feel any distress or discomfort talking about your experience, you can be signposted to relevant organisations for support.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your contribution by sharing your story would be highly valuable in understanding the experience of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the United Kingdom. This would be informative in understanding the needs and concerns of the young people and would be a valuable contribution to the field.

Will my information be kept confidential?

The information you provide is **confidential** and the information you provide will be anonymised for the research.

It will be your decision whether you would give consent to be recorded or not. If you choose to not be recorded, I would like to take notes of the answers you give. If you do wish to be recorded, the data will be stored securely and deleted once the research is over which is in 2025. No one except me (the researcher) will have access to the information you provide during the course of the interview. The paper notes will be transcribed and the details along with audio/video recordings will be stored in the University Box Cloud. Once the research is over, and the thesis is accepted, the files will be deleted permanently from the hard drive.

During the course of one or the two meetings, if you share any information that might indicate that you are at risk of harm or someone else is at risk of harm with what you have disclosed, the researcher will be legally liable to report it. This will be discussed with the participant and they will be informed of how this procedure would take place.

What is the legal basis for using the data and who is the Data Controller?

The Data Controller will be the University of Essex and the contact will be the University's Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk)

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you feel you are interested and would like to take part in the research, please contact me via email at sd19827@essex.ac.uk or message/call at this work number 07440536160

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the study will be shared in the doctoral research paper which will be submitted to the University of Essex. None of the information in the research will be identifiable to any participant.

If you would like to read the results and the research, you can contact me on the details given below and I can provide you a copy.

Who has reviewed the study?

This research study has gained ethical approval by the Ethics Sub Committee 2 at the University of Essex.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the principal investigator of the project, Shireen Dossa, using the contact details below. If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the University's Research Integrity Manager, Dr Mantalena Sotiriadou (e-mail ms21994@essex.ac.uk) If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Information Assurance Manager (e-mail dpo@essex.ac.uk). Please include the ERAMS reference which can be found at the foot of this page.

Contact Details for the Researcher –

Shireen Dossa, student at The University of Essex, Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies.

Email – sd19827@essex.ac.uk

Work Phone – xxxxx6160

PhD Supervisor – Zibiah A Loakthar

Email – z.loakthar@essex.ac.uk

Appendix D – Secondary Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Towards understanding the experiences of agency of unaccompanied asylum-seeking Children and Young People in the UK

Researcher: **Shireen Dossa**, University of Essex^[1]_{SEP}

Contact:^[1]_{SEP} e-mail sd19827@essex.ac.uk **Telephone** xxxxx6160

This research focuses on understanding the experiences of Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK. You are invited to participate if you work as a professional with the young people and would like to share your experience.

I _____, agree to take part in this research focusing on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK.

Shireen has explained her research to me and I understand what it is about. I understand that the research focuses on understanding experiences of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK and I am participating to share my own experience of working as a professional with the young people.

- Everything I say will be **confidential**. That means that Shireen will **not pass on any information** I don't wish to share without my consent
- I can decide **not to take part** in the research **at any stage**.
- Similarly, I can decide to **withdraw my data** at any time. ^[1]_{SEP}
- I can decide if what I say can be **recorded** or not.
- My identity will be **anonymised**.

Participant Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix E – Primary Participant Interview Questions

Interview Protocol and Questions

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to speak to me today.

As you know, this research is about understanding experiences of unaccompanied asylum seeking children in the UK and I would like to ask you a few questions regarding this experience where you are free to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable with. This information is completely confidential. You can withdraw your consent to participate at any point if you feel uncomfortable. You are not being evaluated in anyway, this is just to understand your perspectives and hope to understand better your own story in your own words. Before we begin the interview, I would like to ask you if you are comfortable with me recording the interview? This is only for facilitating the note taking process. For your information, the recording will be permanently deleted once it has been transcribed. If you are not comfortable with being recorded, please tell me now and I will make notes during the interview.

It should not last longer than an hour or hour and a half at the most. If you would like to stop at some point and continue on another day, we can do that as well. If you have any feelings of concern for how you are feeling during the interview, please stop me and we can talk about it. Your well-being is the utmost priority here. If you feel you might need some additional support after the interview, I will be happy to recommend you organisations that offer mental health support. There are also hotlines that you can call if you would just like to speak to someone about how you are feeling.

Please feel free to ask me any questions at any time or please let me know if you need a break.

I would now like to read out the consent form to you and get your consent before we can begin the interview. *Gains Consent* Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

QUESTIONS

Q. How are you doing today?

Q. Have you participated in an interview before?

Prompt – how was the experience?

Q. What are your thoughts on this research topic?

Prompt - How did you get interested in being interviewed for it?

Q. Are you currently engaged in education or employment? What has this experience been like?

Q. Where did you live before moving to the UK?

Prompts- Is that where you were born? Is there anything about this place you'd like to share? What was it like right before you moved here?

Q. How was your journey to the UK?

Q. Since your arrival in the UK, can you share any significant experiences that you remember?

Q. can you share any experience which you might have found challenging or helpful?

Q. What has been your experience with the usage of the English language in the UK?

Q. How would you describe your experience with the people you have met here?

Q. What kind of experience have you had with respect to accommodation and living arrangements in your time here?

Q. What has been the experience like for you coming and being in the UK as an unaccompanied minor? How do think that has impacted you and in what ways?

Q. How would you describe your experience of asylum interviews and appointments?

Q. This research is about understanding the experience of agency, like the ability to act and make choices, feeling of having some influence over your life, what would you say has been your experience been in relation to that while seeking asylum and your time in the UK?

Q. If you think back to your time since you have come to now, what would you say has changed or what you observed about yourself?

Q. How would you describe your current life in the UK?

Q. Is there anything else about your experience in the asylum process that you'd like to share?

Q. Do you have any thoughts on unaccompanied children and young people and their time in the UK?

Post Interview comments –

Thank you so much for answering the questions.

How are you feeling?

How do you feel after having shared your experience? What did you think of the questions as part of the research?

Thank you so much for giving your precious time today and I truly appreciate you sharing your experience.

I would also like to remind you if you feel you no longer want your data included in the research, you can call me on my phone 07440xxxxxx or email me at sd19827@essex.ac.uk.

The participant Information sheet also has the information for my supervisor, if you wish to discuss any concerns that you may not like to take up with me directly.

If you have any other questions regarding this interview or the research please feel free to write to me on this email.

Thank you again!

Appendix F- Secondary population participants Questions

Name

Age

Profession

Qualification

Q. Can you tell me a little bit about where you are based and where you work?

Q. What is your professional experience of working with refugees? And how long?

Q. What has been your experience in particular with UASCs?

- How long?
- What kind of services does your organization provide?
- What was this experience like for you?
- What were your motivations around working with refugees or young people?

Q. In case of different professional capacities, did you experience yourself as similar or different in these roles in relation to the young people?

Q. In terms of the asylum process, what do you think the process is like for the young people?

Q. In your experience, have you found young people able to express their needs/concerns/wishes/thoughts to you?

Q. What do you think about the topic of agency in relation to the young people who arrived as unaccompanied minors?

- How do you think agency looks like in their time in the asylum process?
- In your interactions with UASCs and what they might have shared with you, how do you think they felt in terms of having agency?
- What do you think facilitates or hinders agency for young people?
- Any particular experiences from your role or organization that you feel has a direct impact on UASC agency?

Q. any final comments and feelings on the topic of agency and UASCs?

Appendix G – Recruitment Flyer for Primary Participants

Call for Participants

You are invited to a research study on understanding the experiences of agency of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK.

Did you arrive in the UK when you were under 18 years of age to seek asylum?

Did you travel alone/without family?

Have you received a refugee/leave to remain status?

Would you like to share your experience?

Requirement – Participants must be adults, 18 years and above and should have received their refugee status/leave to remain in the last 3-5 years to be able to participate.

Commitment – A meeting for up to 60 minutes

Participants will be given a 10 GBP gift card voucher as a gesture of thanks for their time.

Researcher Details - Shireen Dossa, University of Essex.

Please contact me on sd19827@essex.ac.uk or xxxxx6160 if you would like to participate or require further information.

Appendix H – Ethical Approval I

29/01/2021

Miss Shireen Dossa

Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies

University of Essex

Dear Shireen,

Ethics Committee Decision

I am writing to advise you that your research proposal entitled "Living with uncertainty; navigating loss and control of autonomy as experienced by unaccompanied minors during the asylum process in the United Kingdom." has been reviewed by the Ethics Sub Committee 2.

The Committee is content to give a favourable ethical opinion of the research. I am pleased, therefore, to tell you that your application has been granted ethical approval by the Committee.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information or have any queries.

Yours sincerely,

Beverley Pascoe

Ethics ETH2021-0004: Miss Shireen Dossa

Appendix I – Ethical Approval II

26/03/2024

Miss Shireen Dossa

Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies

University of Essex

Dear Shireen,

Ethics Committee Decision

Application: ETH2324-0860

I am pleased to inform you that the research proposal entitled "Living with uncertainty; navigating loss and control of autonomy as experienced by unaccompanied minors during the asylum process in the United Kingdom." has been reviewed on behalf of the Ethics Sub Committee 2, and, based on the information provided, it has been awarded a favourable opinion.

The application was awarded a favourable opinion subject to the following **conditions**:

Extensions and Amendments:

If you propose to introduce an amendment to the research after approval or extend the duration of the study, an amendment should be submitted in ERAMS for further approval in advance of the expiry date listed in the ethics application form. Please note that it is not possible to make any amendments, including extending the duration of the study, once the expiry date has passed.

Covid-19:

Please note that the current Government guidelines in relation to Covid-19 must be adhered to and are subject to change and it is your responsibility to keep yourself informed and bear in mind the possibility of change when planning your research. You will be kept informed if there are any changes in the University guidelines.

Yours sincerely,

REO Research Governance Team

Ethics ETH2324-0860: Miss Shireen Dossa

