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Refugee and asylum-seeker children's experiences: results of a meta ethnography

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ABSTRACT

Children's geographies research contributes to the intent of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child by comprehending children as cogent agents in the telling and creation of their lives. Voices of asylum-seeking and refugee children are under-represented in the research literature. Hence, reference to their needs in relevant national and international policy contexts is inadequately informed. A meta ethnography synthesised self-reported needs and experiences of 288 child refugees and asylum-seekers across eight interview-based studies, each of which included at least one child aged 13 or younger. The guiding question for the study is: How do children describe their experiences within the systems designed to support refugee and asylum-seekers? Results indicate that refugee and asylum-seeker children can and must speak for themselves. Adults and services must listen to ensure policies and services are adequately informed by children's perspectives and needs.

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Refugee child; rights of the child; asylum-seeking children; qualitative methods; meta-synthesis

The field of children's geographies (CG) examines and explores the spaces of children and young people's lives. As such CG aims to engage and report critical, relevant dimensions of children's aesthetic, social, and ethical experience (Aitken 2018). CG research contributes to the intent of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) by comprehending children as able to coherently account for their lives and geographies, often in spite of challenging and overwhelming situations (Yarwood and Tyrrell 2012).

Children's geographers examine how children appear in spaces, alongside how they engage and inhabit space, and therefore how their identity and self are known and expressed (Aitken 2018). Consideration of children's experiences requires that we can also reflect, as adults, as to how children are enabled or constrained within their geographical environments (Aitken 2018; Silver 2020). Considering children and childhood within a radical, critical space will lead to widening care policies and systems beyond our current perspectives (Silver 2020).

Children's geographies reporting experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking¹ are uncommon in the literature, with children typically only included when the focus is on family experiences (McAlister, Beazley, and Raha 2019). To redress the current minimal focus on the unique experiences of children who are refugees and asylum-seekers, this meta ethnography accessed and synthesised the narratives of children as reported in interview-based research studies which included one or more children 13 years or younger. The guiding question for the

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study was: How do children describe their experiences within the systems intended to support refugee and asylum-seekers?

Refugee and asylum-seeker children

An estimated fifty-two per cent of the world's 25.4 million refugees are children, with 173,800 of them separated or unaccompanied (Stevens 2020). 143 countries are signatories to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) protocol (UNHCR 1967), agreeing to resettle a certain number of refugees annually. These countries also undertake processing of asylum applications for people who reach their shores with substantiated fears of persecution (Kerwin and Nicholson 2021).

It is well documented that refugee children experience high levels of distress and potential trauma in the process of leaving their country of origin eventually arriving at the new destination country for resettlement, often many years later (Woodland et al. 2010). Terrorising events, severe deprivation, unbearable losses and upheaval occur for most children during this transition period (Chase, 2013; Rousseau, et al. 2001; Thomas, Nafees, and Bhugra 2004). This process compromises children's expectation of safety, freedom, legal rights, empowerment, and hope (Shakya et al. 2010).

Children, adolescents and young adults currently seeking asylum, or have undergone resettlement as a refugee, may be fearful but unable to advise others of these fears, and are challenged in providing clear communication because of their past experiences including stress and trauma (Hebebrand et al. 2016). Unaccompanied Minors (UM) have greater vulnerability (Derluyn and Broekaert 2007), but are often invisible in national statistics about refugee and asylum-seekers (Rosen, et al. 2021). More recently the United Kingdom records numbers of children arriving aged 17 years or younger. In 2022 children comprised 17% of asylum-seekers (Home Office UK 2023).

Considering the prevalence of sexual violence in refugee populations Araujo et al. (2019) analysed 60 peer reviewed papers to find that young female refugee and asylum-seekers are the highest cohort of reported victims of sexual violence, but men and children are also victims. Overall the phenomenon of sexual violence is under reported. There is notable absence of information about genital mutilation or sexual torture in review studies of prevalence of sexual violence, as most reviews refer only to rape (Araujo et al. 2019). There is minimal information regards prevention of sexual violence perpetrated within and toward asylum-seeker and refugee communities, especially concerning as there is evidence available that the violence does not stop once the destination country is reached (De Schrijver et al. 2018).

There are multiple accounts of refugee children so overwhelmed by their experiences that they cannot function, fall into a stupor, and require tube feeding (see Ngo and Hodes 2020), resulting in a diagnostic category of *resignation syndrome* (Sallin et al. 2016). With similarities to *pervasive refusal syndrome* (Nunn, Lask, and Owen 2014) it is telling that reports of both diagnoses specifically mention refugee and asylum-seeker children as a vulnerable group. Understanding children's needs more clearly, and having effective ways to respond to these needs, starts with taking account of their reports of their experiences, not only symptoms of distress. A responsive child-focused system may address the situations and resultant needs.

In some countries, for example the UK, UM have lower incidence than adults of being granted refugee status (Crawley 2010). One explanation is that services provided to refugees and asylum-seekers are not adequately child-oriented (Crawley 2010). Procedures and workers are embedded in adulthood (Flasher 1978), overlooking the contribution children can make to describing and asserting their experiences and rights (Ottosson, Eastmond, and Cederborg 2017). Greater attention to research that is child-focused informs development of appropriate policies and support services.

Meta ethnography

Meta ethnography is a method of qualitative synthesis method founded in the 1980s (Noblit and Hare 1988). It is a relatively common method in healthcare studies since the 1990s, but is not

currently used in human geography research. The utility of application and findings reported here may be of value to the field.

Meta ethnography is a synthesis of findings from selected qualitative studies relevant to the research theme or question by reflecting or *translating* them into one another (Noblit and Hare 1988; Toye et al. 2014). 'Interpretations and explanations in the original studies are treated as data, and are translated across several studies' (Britten et al. 2002, 210). The thematic and conceptual material within each study is compared across the outcomes of the studies with the ultimate goal of presenting new insights through a synthesis of findings. The goal of any type of meta-synthesis is to engage a third order interpretation to go beyond initial findings of each study (Britten et al. 2002).

Meta synthesis and its various methods have proliferated (Edwards and Kaimal 2016). Caveats are warranted as to quality and applicability of procedures and findings (Thorne 2017). Rigorous meta synthesis engages a close, in-depth examination of findings across multiple studies, deepening and enriching understandings of human experiences. This meta ethnography aims to promote better understanding of refugee and asylum-seeker children's rights and needs.

Motivations of the researcher

I am a qualified and registered creative arts therapist in Australia with experience conducting research into music therapy for health and wellbeing, mainly with children and families but also in adult mental health. As Chair of the Board of Directors for the Association for the Wellbeing of Children in Healthcare, I am engaged in ongoing advocacy for children and young people. I have a long track record leading clinical training programmes, mainly at postgraduate level. As a young child my family were involved in a massive natural disaster losing our home and possessions irrevocably. More impactfully, we were immediately relocated to a new part of Australia causing upheaval and mental strain, requiring ongoing adaptation. As an adult I recognised the trauma experienced, and sought assistance for the impacts on my own mental health in relation to these past experiences. This personal insight into challenges for refugee children navigating their distressed families alongside their new environment motivates research and practical support undertaken in programmes to support asylum-seekers and refugees. I also completed the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma. Through my personal experience, and training that I receive and provide, I recognise that children's voices are frequently absent, or marginalised. When included they are often an addendum to youth and parent or adult experiences. I seek to highlight the absence of children's voices in refugee studies, and amplify relevant voices, to provide helpful information about children's needs.

Method

Published studies based on qualitative interviews offer a way to understand children's lived experiences, and their emotional landscape, in experiences of fleeing and resettlement (Ottosson, Eastmond, and Cederborg 2017). In a child-focused review of asylum-seeker children in detention in Australia McAlister, et al (2019) demonstrated that children are able to give rich accounts of their experiences relevant to the formation of policy to guide ethical treatment of children in aligned services. Interviews provide individualised and detailed evidence of substantive and particular experiences, increasing sensitivity to the needs and experiences of these children.

Meta ethnography (Noblit and Hare 1988) guided the analysis, with the eMERGe framework (France et al. 2019) consulted retrospectively. Seven steps are followed in meta ethnography: getting started; deciding what is relevant to the initial interest; reading the studies; determining how the studies are related; translating the studies into one another; synthesising translations; and expressing the synthesis (Noblit and Hare 1988).

Getting started and deciding what is relevant to the initial interest

The inclusion criteria for the studies in the meta ethnography:

- (1) Written in the English language;
- (2) Published in a peer-reviewed journal;
- (3) Included in-depth qualitative interviews;
- (4) Included children, with at least one interview participant aged 13 years or younger;
- (5) Focused primarily on refugees and asylum-seekers.

The organising task for commencement of the review was to find papers published in peer reviewed journals with first-hand accounts of the experiences of refugee children. Medline, AIO, SSCI, CINAHL, IBSS, EMBASE and JSTOR databases were accessed using a global electronic search with combinations of the terms *child* and *refugee*, *refugee* and *interview*, and *qualitative* and *interview* along with *refugee child**. Most of the papers found through this process were not directly relevant to the study.

Lorenc et al. (2012) noted researchers often employ Cochrane-style search methods when conducting meta syntheses (Lefebvre et al. 2021) in order to be accepted by an editor or the reviewers. In healthcare research there is no agreed number of papers to successfully complete a meta ethnography (France et al. 2019). Instead, the quality of data from each paper accounts for the success of the final report (France et al. 2019). Meta synthesis reviews are more useful when a small number of the most relevant papers are included (Lorenc et al. 2012).

A group of 30 papers were collected focussed on the theme of children's experiences of being a refugee or asylum-seeker; found through a Google scholar search, and by reading reference lists of relevant papers on web sites.² These papers were gradually honed to a smaller number through reading each paper several times and deciding its inclusion. The most consistent reason for non-inclusion was relevant keywords were noted but the focus was on older teenagers and/or young adults. Thus, most rejected papers did not meet the criteria for inclusion of at least one child 13 years or younger.

No geographical location was specified in the inclusion criteria; either for the country of origin, or for the destination country where the interviews took place. Other meta syntheses are not confined to a particular country of origin or settlement (for example Kingsbury and Chatfield 2019). Archambault (2012) included children from eight conflict zones in a study of refugee children's narratives about resettlement. Shakya et al. (2010) studied the experiences of Afghan, Karen, and Sudanese youth relocated to Toronto. It is relatively usual to refer to both asylum-seeker and refugee children in studies of their experiences, as although engaged in different legal processes, they are nonetheless likely to have similar, shared experiences (see Spicer 2008). Therefore, papers were included if they referred to experiences of children with varied status from asylum-seekers housed in the intended country of residence, to children in refugee camps awaiting placement (see Table 1).

Some papers from initial search results were not included because the children were identified as having immigrant status but were technically neither asylum-seekers nor refugees (for example, Fassetta 2015; Roth and Grace 2015). Some papers were removed as they did not include qualitative analysis of in-depth interview data, or were not focused on children's perspectives. For example, children were interviewed with their parents, or parental and adult views were included in the overall analysis and findings (see Morantz, Rousseau, and Heymann 2011; Thoresen et al, 2017).

Initially a ten-year period was considered necessary to ensure recency of publication. However, too few papers were found using this criteria so two earlier papers were included (Maegusuku-Hewett et al. 2007; Thomas, Nafees, and Bhugra 2004). The initial search found only two papers meeting the criteria. In the follow-on search, and through close examination of the reference

Table 1. Characteristics of papers included in the review.

Author/year	Child participants	Context – resettlement status	Country	Themes/findings
Ayoub and Zhou (2016)	<i>N</i> = 6, 3F Aged 12–13 years	Somali refugees	Canada	Lack of basic necessities of life No formal education Violence and abuse Refugee camp memories.
Chase (2013)	<i>N</i> = 54, 29F Aged 11–23 years	Unaccompanied children and young people	England	Trauma and its destabilising impact on self Lack of status, loss of identity Mental health and insecurity The value of order, routine and security
Kaukko and Wernesjö (2017)	Cohort 1: <i>N</i> = 12 all female Aged 8–17 Cohort 2: <i>N</i> = 11, 2F Aged 16–19	Cohort 1: unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in a reception centre Cohort 2: former UM after being granted residency	Cohort 1: Finland Cohort 2: Sweden	Young masculinity constitutes the norm which girls must then navigate Conflicts with reception centre staff – behaviour and food requests Existing in a continuum between childhood and adulthood
Maegusuku-Hewett et al. (2007)	<i>N</i> = 47 (gender not provided) Aged 9–18	Asylum seeker children across four dispersal centres	Wales, UK	Children highlighted their attributes of optimism, patience, confidence and hope Cultural identity was a protective process, and basis for resilience. Strategies included resistance, ethnic separation, hybridity and assimilation
Meyer et al. (2013)	<i>N</i> = 23, 13F Aged 9–17	Burmese children in a Thai refugee camp	Thailand	Children noted fighting between adults, alcohol use in all ages, and child abuse. Causes included economic and social conditions of the camp environment, and changes in family structures. Children are chronically exposed to stressors which impact their growth and development.
Nho, Yoon, and Ko (2018)	<i>N</i> = 15 9F Aged 9–18	Varied status – asylum-seeking applicants, humanitarian status holders, resettling refugees, and identified refugees.	Republic of Korea	Chaos Daily hassles Changed life Helping hands Dreams alongside their displacement process.
Ottosson, Eastmond, and Cederborg (2017)	<i>N</i> = 20, 10F Aged 7–17	Asylum seeking children attending school living in houses with their families; parents and siblings.	Sweden	Some tactics aimed at avoiding situations and settings that made children uncomfortable, others involved influencing their situation through pursuing 'personal projects'. Many children's strivings were directed at creating 'a normal life' and a place for themselves in Swedish society
Thomas, Nafees, and Bhugra (2004)	<i>N</i> = 100, 49F Aged 11–17	Unaccompanied asylum seeking children.	UK	The uncertain nature of status impacts ability to settle and integrate, causing unnecessary anxiety about deportation. Some form of violence was the primary reason for flight in almost all cases – one third reported being raped before leaving their country of origin, with around half of these reporting multiple rapes.

lists of the initial publications, a further six papers were found resulting in eight papers for analysis (see Appendix 1).

Reading the studies

The studies were read multiple times to garner characteristics of each study (see Table 1). Interviews with 288 children comprised the eight studies with locations including Canada, Finland, Korea, Sweden, Thailand, and the UK. Three papers focussed on UM experiences.

Most papers referred to insecurity of the children's circumstances whether in relation to the future, or immediate issues such as lack of resources and poor or unavailable accommodation. A number of reports included children's future aspirations, especially with reference to the role of education in building routines in precarious circumstances fuelling their hope for a better life.

Two papers included reference to child participants who witnessed killings of family members, and these papers referred to experiences of rape and sexual abuse (Chase, 2013; Thomas, Nafees, and Bhugra 2004). One paper which included extensive details of sexual violence recorded that 32 of the 100 children in the sample reported being raped with 50% of these reporting multiple rapes (Thomas, Nafees, and Bhugra 2004). No papers indicated information about any of the child participants having killed others although this has been documented in other studies focused on refugees fleeing war contexts and child soldiers (for example, Betancourt et al. 2015).

Concepts were extracted from the papers by highlighting themes identified within the research, or recording a salient feature of the findings. Two relevant papers not aligned to the criteria (Crawley 2010; Hopkins and Hill 2010) were used as reference papers in lieu of consultation with co-researchers regularly employed in meta ethnography (see Britten et al. 2002; O'Callaghan et al. 2016). Themes in these comparator papers were considered when developing emergent concepts to ensure alignment with children's experiences and behaviours within the refugee process.

Determining how the studies were related to each other

Through reading the papers multiple times, and making memos of the commentary and experiences of refugee children, more than fifty concepts were identified (see abridged list at Table 2).

These concepts were then contrasted and compared across the papers in consultation with the reference papers. Nine meta-concepts were devised through finding likenesses across the original group of concepts then comparing these to each of the main findings of the studies. It was intended to ensure each of the meta-concepts related to every study but this required problematic *forcing* so was reconsidered. Therefore, most of the final meta-concepts [see Table 3] are relevant to most of the papers.

Results: translating the studies into one another

Individual concepts arising from each papers are compared with all the others, checking similarities and differences between concepts and metaphors, which allows the researcher to create further groupings of conceptual categories (Cahill et al. 2018). Translation from the meta-concepts into four summary concepts was elaborated through second and third order interpretations (see Table 4). From this process nine final meta-concepts were condensed into the following four concepts;

- (1) Being in limbo in the asylum-seeking process results in insecurity; Children use multiple strategies to maintain agency
- (2) Negative influences and disruptive experiences effect behaviour and choices; The immigration system can be a negative intrusive force in everyday life; Gender can have an influence; Losses and past trauma intrude on the present

Table 2. Concepts across the studies (abridged).

Losses are prevalent and experienced in personal and ontological terms affecting the development of coherent identity and valued status
Being in limbo results in insecurity and fear
Being negatively <i>branded</i> as an asylum seeker – categorised as <i>other</i> – unable to represent themselves with biographical coherence
Learning the language is a <i>door</i> to fitting in and finding opportunities
Persistent intrusion of government and departments
Availability of alcohol in refugee camps – children using alcohol – fighting
Children stealing, fighting and drinking –because of neglect and abuse/family problems
Loss of trust in adults
Not having enough food to eat in the camps negatively influences behaviour
Sexuality and early pregnancy – sometimes because of alcohol
Financial problems
Adults beating and raping children
Feelings of despair and hopelessness/pessimism
Children can stop going to school and lose interest in education
In a residential care situation there may be many rules some of which do not seem to have a basis in the child's interest or needs. Children are not consulted – just <i>told</i>
Emergent curiosity about gender in the new country in comparison to accepted roles in the country of origin
Experiences of racism contribute to identity through hybridism, separation and resistance – for example wearing the hijab as a personal expression of cultural identity/pride.
Many teenage males described racism from verbal to physical abuse but the younger children in the study did not describe experiences of racism
Sexual violence is prevalent and more prevalent among unaccompanied children
Children can feel overlooked in the immigration process –never asked to give an account of themselves.
A lack of parental support combined with lack of child-centred practices in the immigration services leaves children vulnerable
Children's attempts at claiming agency are not always what adults or parents will approve of, for example silence.
The immigration process can cause discomfort and result in avoidance (a child pretends she has to go to school when a family meeting is called).
The administrative processes can prompt resistance – a 14-year-old girl when granted asylum had papers signed by her parents and asks that she also be able to sign the papers.
Families aspire to an ordinary and everyday life of routine with school and leisure as the focus
Silence (about immigration processes) maintains hope in the future
Imagination, playfulness and creativity are used to shield from possibility that a residency permit might not be granted
Strategies such as creating one's own space (reading during school breaks) or going into public places alone or with friends/siblings are an escape to feel 'happy and normal'
Parents losing hope for the future can result in children becoming parentified
Children respond tactically to difficult parental situations – including devitalised actions of self-neglect and harm as a way to manage loss of control
School offers hope for the future – the <i>normal</i> life
Learning the language quickly can facilitate integration and improve school performance
Lack of money, being placed in a rural environment, and having no friends at school can compound children's loneliness and isolation.
There can be a disconnect between the aspirations of the system and the lived experiences of children

- (3) A *happy and normal life* is hoped for; Learning and education can be a key to a hopeful future
- (4) Relationships with adults can be protective or destructive, and are sometimes difficult to manage

Synthesising the translations

The translated concepts were further elaborated in the following three synthesising statements by moving back and forth between the summary concepts and the descriptions of experiences afforded through reading the interview commentary within each paper.

Being in limbo in the asylum-seeking process awaiting a decision results in insecurity. Children use multiple strategies to maintain and promote personal agency and self-regulation, but a coherent biographical narrative and access to cultural continuity may be unavailable due to uncertainty about the future. While some strategies used by children to manage their equilibrium may have short term effectiveness, many strategies are potentially harmful and will have long term impacts. Negative influences and disruptive experiences effect behaviour and choices which may be difficult for adults to understand and respond with adequate empathy.

Table 3. Linked concepts across the papers with emerging categories.

Emerging categories	Linked concepts
Losses and past trauma intrude on the present	Loss as a personal and ontological process affected by – and then affecting – current identity, status Because of past trauma, focussing attention at school can be challenging Teenagers positioned as children in the new country may find this position at odds with their previous role of having greater responsibility – care for the home, care of younger children etc.
Being in limbo in the asylum seeking process results in insecurity	Insecurity and feeling fearful Insecurity Children feel shielded from the asylum process by their parents but also feel involved (rushing to the letterbox when the mail arrives to see if there is a letter from the immigration services) Applying for asylum can compound trauma because of the inherent uncertainty
The immigration system can be a negative intrusive force in everyday life	Subjected to tight restrictions Persistent intrusion of government and departments into their lives There can be a disconnect between the aspirations of the system (Sweden's reception policy of offering children a <i>normal</i> life) and the lived experiences of children In a residential care situation there may be many rules some of which do not seem to have a basis in the child's interest or needs. Children are not consulted – just <i>told</i> Children can feel overlooked in the immigration process – ignored by the workers, and never asked to give an account of themselves. The immigration process can cause discomfort and result in avoidance (a child pretends she has to go to school when a family meeting is called).
Negative influences and disruptive experiences effect behaviour and choices	Availability of alcohol in the refugee camps – children using alcohol – fights between children Children stealing, fighting and drinking –because of neglect and abuse/family problems Loss of trust in adults Children using alcohol because of peer behaviour or because their parents drink Sexuality and early pregnancy –sometimes because of alcohol Financial problems Feelings of despair and hopelessness/pessimism Because of many difficulties children can stop going to school and lose interest in education Sexual violence is prevalent in the experiences of many children seeking asylum or within the refugee programme Sexual violence is more prevalent among children who are unaccompanied Being negatively <i>branded</i> as an asylum seeker – categorised as <i>other</i> – unable to represent themselves with biographical coherence Many of the teenage males in the study described racism from verbal to physical abuse but the younger children in the study did not describe experiences of racism Not having enough food to eat in the camps negatively influences behaviour Experiences of racism contribute to identity through hybridism, separation and /or resistance identity for example wearing the hijab as a personal expression of cultural identity and cultural pride. One example of desired assimilation and steps to achieve this. Lack of money, being placed in a rural environment, and having no friends at school can compound children's loneliness and isolation.
Learning and education can be a key to a hopeful future	School offers hope for the future – the normal life Children need knowledge of the new country including opportunities to learn the language
Gender can have an influence	Optimism and minimisation are strategies that can improve resilience Where the gender balance was unequal in the residential units (majority males) females described working out their place carefully

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued.

Emerging categories	Linked concepts
Relationships with adults can be protective or destructive and are sometimes difficult to manage	<p>especially when feeling fearful about how it could work. However, the boys did not discuss the girls in the interviews.</p> <p>Compared to boys, girls can have some restriction in navigating access to the living space and outside world within the context of residential care</p> <p>Curiosity about gender in the new country in comparison to accepted roles in the country of origin</p> <p>Bullying and abuse – adults beating and raping children in the camps</p> <p>Parents losing hope for the future can result in children becoming parentified, especially when the child speaks the language and the parent does not – children can feel responsible to bring fun and happiness into the tense home environment</p> <p>A lack of parental support combined with lack of child-centred practices in the immigration services leaves children additionally vulnerable</p> <p>Children respond tactically to difficult parental situations</p> <p>Some children come to a country of safety but are not safe – they are passed from family to family like a servant and poorly treated by adults</p> <p>Children's attempts at claiming agency are not always what adults or parents will approve of – e.g. silence.</p> <p>Conflict over what food is available (in the accommodation) can cause tensions</p>
Children use multiple strategies to maintain agency	<p>Children can seek approval locally through social or educational systems with the belief this approval will translate into approval from the authorities for their application to stay</p> <p>Learning the language quickly can facilitate integration and improve school performance but this also aligns with magical thinking where the child probably knows that doing well at school is unlikely to effect the asylum decision</p> <p>Imagination, playfulness and creativity were used to shield from the possibility that a residency permit might not be granted</p> <p>Silence (about the immigration process and its attendant uncertainty) is a way to maintain hope in the future</p> <p>The process of being in the immigration services can also prompt resistance – a 14-year-old girl when granted asylum had papers signed by her parents but asked that she also be able to sign the papers.</p>
A 'happy and normal life' is hoped for	<p>Families aspire to an ordinary and everyday life of routine with school and leisure as the focus</p> <p>Strategies such as creating one's own space (reading during school breaks) or going into public places alone or with friends/siblings were an escape to feel 'happy and normal'.</p>

The immigration system can be a negative intrusive force in everyday life impacting children's stability and confidence. While it is acknowledged that male and female children can have violent traumatic experiences that lead to the need for asylum from their home country, girls are at greater risk for sexual assault before and during the process of seeking asylum.

While a *happy and normal life* is hoped for, losses and past trauma can intrude on the present. Learning and education are invested with hopes for the future. Relationships with adults can be protective or destructive and are sometimes difficult to manage; psychological and physical safety may be unavailable to the child.

Discussion of the findings

Most of the 288 participants included in this meta-synthesis shared experiences of being a child during the process of fleeing their country of origin and seeking resettlement as a refugee or asylum-seeker. This synthesis indicates important themes of their experiences around precariousness, uncertainty, developmental challenges, and problems of being misunderstood. The discussion

Table 4. Summary concepts with second and third order interpretations.

Summary concepts	Second order interpretations	Third order interpretations
Being in limbo in the asylum seeking process results in insecurity; Children use multiple strategies to maintain agency	Identity development may be compromised and cause psychological stress which in turn may lead to maladaptive coping	Perception of children's behaviours by adults must be mediated by empathy towards the uncertainty they face when in limbo in the immigration system, and the child's immature coping and defense structures
Negative influences and disruptive experiences effect behaviour and choices; The immigration system can be a negative intrusive force in everyday life; Gender can have an influence; Losses and past trauma intrude on the present	Many children have had past traumatic experiences which will affect their current presentation and behaviour	Adults can respond to the child's physical and psychological symptoms with compassion and empathy even if they do not always make sense
A 'happy and normal life' is hoped for: Learning and education can be a key to a hopeful future	Many children engage positively in education including learning the language of the new country. This is seen by many as a lifeline to a positive and productive future	School experiences and the value of education can be emphasised in interaction with the child and family as a way of developing rapport and gaining trust
Relationships with adults can be protective or destructive and are sometimes difficult to manage	Traumatised children interacting with traumatised adults can feel continually unsafe	Creating safety occurs initially by perceiving status as a child first, with immigration status as a lower order consideration.

below provides reflection on four concepts developed from the synthesis, and includes direct quotes from the children's interviews to illuminate their perspectives.

Being in limbo in the asylum-seeking process results in insecurity; children use multiple strategies to maintain agency

The findings across multiple of the studies pointed to the difficulty of insecurity of one's current and future identity, especially for children born in a refugee camp outside their parents' homeland, and then brought to a further country to be settled.

I do not belong to this country ... I do not belong in Ethiopia, I do not belong in Eritrea. I do not belong to England ... If you ask me where is your home, I don't know ... I don't know my country ... I can't speak my language ... I don't want to go there, because I don't have anybody there ... I don't have family.

(Chase, 2013, 866)

Negative influences and disruptive experiences effect behaviour and choices; the immigration system can be a negative intrusive force in everyday life; gender can have an influence; losses and past trauma intrude on the present

Precariousness, feelings of not being safe, nor having safe places to be, were consistently encountered in the analysis whether in the child's current circumstances or historically.

My parents were killed. . . I was used like a servant and abused. I came to England when I was 13 to work, and I was passed among many families. They treated me very badly and I never went to school.

(Thomas, Nafees, and Bhugra 2004, 117)

Other results indicated that the parent's difficulties complicated the child's ability to be social and learn.

Some children are shy among their friends because their parents are drinking. For example, the people will say to the children that your father drinks alcohol, so the children will be shy and won't be able to go among the people.

(Meyer et al. 2013, 1039)

Multiple themes from the results pointed to endemic sexual and physical violence, including gender based, and within families, as well as from adults towards children.

... sometimes they [military boys] might try to come in the refugee camp and rape people in the camp even though the government said you can't do that ... everything that happens there [refugee camp] was all about violence, there's like never peace.

(Ayoub and Zhou 2016, 12)

... the soldiers searched our house. They beat all the children in the house. They raped me and my stepsisters in front of my father ... and I got pregnant and I paid for an abortion.

Then I got beaten and raped again ...

(Thomas, Nafees, and Bhugra 2004, 118)

A *happy and normal life* is hoped for; Learning and education can be a key to a hopeful future. School experiences are identified as safety-inducing and potentially transformative.

... in my country everything was very bad. The schools were closed and we couldn't do anything. I had the dream of getting educated in one of the best countries in Europe.

(Thomas, Nafees, and Bhugra 2004, 115)

Until like I was here [in Canada] four years, I stopped thinking about the teachers are gonna hit me, and I'm like now I know Canada is safe, now I know the teachers will not hit me, and I can tell them about my problems.

(Ayoub and Zhou 2016, 12)

Opportunities to engage playfulness and imagination buffered recall of the past, and dread of the future. This indicates schools and educational services are key contexts in which safe spaces are created for children's learning and play. Thus, education systems are required to consider the needs of refugee and asylum-seeker children, and the skills needed by staff to support and enhance children's experiences.

However, Chase also identified that there can be despair about the pointlessness of education if deportation is a constant threat. As one of her respondent's identified:

It's really, really stressful. I ask, 'what I am doing this for?' Two months before I graduate, they might ask me to leave the country. You just don't know. It's really horrible. You don't know if you'll be able to live here the day after tomorrow. I don't enjoy thinking about the future at the moment. I just want to take it step by step. Not knowing doesn't make me feel more motivated – it actually puts me off.

(Chase, 865)

Relationships with adults can be protective or destructive, and are sometimes difficult to manage

Children in the studies included here advised experiences of being overlooked in the system, ignored by adults, and not having their voices heard. For example, a child respondent indicated being underestimated as follows:

Yes teachers were very surprised because I got an A for everything and the other children weren't able to do it.

(Maegusuku-Hewett, et al., 2007, 314)

Other reflections on family life by children were the differences between life before settlement.

When we were in (refugee camp) Thailand, we were left alone and ate by ourselves because parents went out to work for long hours. When we came to Korea, we sat down together and had dinner happily together.

(Nho, et al. 2018, 612)

The meta synthesis revealed multiple dimensions of attempts at agency by children. This included actions such as using silence, refusing to attend meetings, and/or self-harm, as a means to gain a sense of control. This contrasted with reported responses more aligned with fatalistic resignation and escape, such as depression and alcoholism.

Archambault (2012) indicated resettlement as a series of events, rather than one final step, for refugee and asylum-seeker children in the Norwegian public support system, with each step engaging dimensions of insecurity and uncertainty. As Nho et al (2018) found, many refugee and asylum seeker children engaged in interviews advised that they were talking about their experiences for the first time.

Understanding children's experiences can only be gleaned by close and deep listening to their accounts of the process of resettlement. This listening needs to be embedded as standard in service design and provision, aligned with contemporary calls to give greater account of children's perspectives in relation to their experiences of being refugees and/or asylum-seekers (McAlister et al., 2019). Rather than only celebrating survivorship, refugee children and asylum-seeker children benefit from engaging *geographies of hope* to support and enhance their flourishing (McAlister, et al., 2019).

The geographer Crawley (2010) noted that much of the research available about children in the refugee and asylum system is commissioned from organisations with a remit to provide care and protection to children. These studies tend to focus on the neediness of refugee children and cast them as 'powerless, innocent, and profoundly vulnerable' (Crawley 2010, 162). Lems, Oester, and Strasser (2020) described the potential backlash against children who do not fit in the picture of the lost, innocent, apolitical refugee which can result in them being treated as *dangerous*. Wernesjö (2012; 2015) warned against the creation of a category of *problem* children and youth in research which examines UM needs.

For a refugee child to have the best opportunity in the new country, every system with which they engage, from schooling to healthcare, should focus on the present first, the future second, and the past last (Hopkins and Hill 2010).

Limitations of the study

Meta ethnography is usually conducted with a group of authors. Instead, this study was developed by a sole author. The paper in draft form was sent to a number of expert readers for quality assurance, and their comments were incorporated, or changes made, based on their feedback. All pre-readers noted the small number of papers ($N=8$) with concern, as did reviewers. To include more papers, it would be necessary to a. expand the method beyond in-depth qualitative interview, and/or b. open the age range to include reports where no children 13 years old or younger are included.³ In their meta ethnography of resilience in young refugees Sleijpen et al. (2016) found 26 papers. However, only nine of these included children younger than 13. Both their results and a number of papers found for this study reflects the relatively small number of studies conducted with younger refugee children. Meta syntheses of childhood experience in a range of areas reflect the challenge that only a small number of research studies focus specifically on children. Using the inclusion criteria of interview-based studies in this synthesis limited the number of papers. However, without interviews it is not possible to claim the voice of the child is represented and a similar concern is noted if studies without children are included in the analysis. Readers interested in the experiences of teenagers, and young adults, younger than 18 and up to 25 years of age, are directed to Demazure, Baeyens, and Pinsault (2022).

Conclusion

Meta ethnography permits multiple voices to be reflected in a synthesis of shared experiences. Results of this study are important, impactful and require further attention to ensure supports for refugee and asylum-seeking children are optimised. By undertaking this synthesis of the voices

of 288 children in the asylum-seeking and refugee community it is demonstrated that children can and do speak for themselves in relation to geographies of experience. Ultimately this ensures policies and services are able to be adequately informed from children's perspectives and needs.

Undertaking further child-focused research with refugee and asylum-seeking children is encouraged, with the aim to develop greater understanding of the value of recording and reporting children's experiences of fleeing persecution and building new lives. In turn, through creating a greater body of evidence, policy and practice is better informed.

An urgent matter requiring attention in policy and practice is the relevance of sexual violence experiences. For example, mandated screening for sexual and other types of violence as standard practice in induction of children to services, alongside evidence-based strategies and approaches to prevent sexual violence.

More formal access to children's voices is available to inform service development. For example, reference and focus groups explicitly established to elicit relevant information about children's experiences are key information sources. These consultations are successfully conducted by trusted teachers or other workers known to the children who can be supported to elicit information relevant to inform policy.

Governments and agency policy frameworks specific to refugees and asylum-seeking children need to include their perspective and interests with reference to the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It is intended this review and analysis will guide those efforts, encouraging more researchers to consider and incorporate CG in gaining information and perspectives on asylum-seeker and refugee experience.

Notes

1. Refugee refers to a person who is identified and protected under international law, and cannot return to their country of origin because of likelihood of serious harm or death. An asylum seeker is waiting to have their claim for this protection as a refugee granted or denied. Asylum seeker is a genuine and legal definition of a person seeking refuge from persecution. See UN High Commissioner for Refugees guidance at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/56e81c0d4.html>.
2. For example, the clearing house for refugee research https://www.rch.org.au/immigranthealth/research/Research_by_subject_areas_A_E/ also United Nations online library <http://libraryresources.unog.ch/eres/databases>.
3. The latter was attempted at an early stage to attain compliance with perceived requirements for adequate numbers of papers, but it was immediately apparent the emergent concepts were not child focussed. For example, themes included issues of parenthood, and challenges of professional work.

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Appendix 1

Papers included for analysis in the meta ethnography

5. Ayoub, M., & Zhou, G. (2016). Somali refugee students in Canadian Schools: Pre-migration experiences and challenges in refugee camps. *Comparative and International Education/Éducation Comparée et Internationale*, 45(3), 5.
6. Chase, E. (2013). Security and subjective wellbeing: the experiences of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum in the UK. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 35(6), 858–872.
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