

**Exploring the Experiences of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)
Within a United Kingdom (UK) College Setting**

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Summary

The current study aims to add to the small but growing body of research exploring the views of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). This research aims to provide further guidance to professionals, including educational psychologists (EPs), in order to better support the emotional and educational needs of UASC.

This thesis consists of three chapters, these include a literature review, an empirical study and a reflective account. Chapter one involves a semi-systematic literature review which uses Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) to explore factors impacting children and young people (CYP) from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds.

The empirical research consists of conducting semi-structured interviews with seven young people classed as UASC within one specific college setting. The interviews sought to explore their experiences of the college they were attending. Data analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis generated five themes and 10 subthemes. The implications for educational psychology practice are considered, followed by a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the current research.

The third chapter provides reflections on the research journey. This consists of personal reflections on the research topic, positioning of the researcher and challenges encountered throughout the process. Considerations for future research are also discussed along with hopes for future dissemination.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
AEP	Assistant educational psychologist
BPS	British Psychological Society
BPSEM	Bio-Psycho-Socio-Ecological Model
CYP	Children and young people
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
EP	Educational psychologist
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
UASC	Unaccompanied asylum seeking children
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Introduction and Overview

Focus of the Research

Within the literature review, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is used to examine a range of factors which potentially impact the emotional and educational needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) and refugee children and young people (CYP). The empirical research explores the emotional and educational experiences of UASC within one college setting in the United Kingdom (UK). UASC potentially encounter more challenges than refugees due to their lack of family and support network and the additional uncertainty over their asylum status (Morgan, 2018).

The current research seeks to amplify the voices of UASC, inform educational policy and practice and provide practical tools and insights for educational professionals and educational psychologists (EP) working with this population. The research aims to highlight the experiences of young people from marginalised backgrounds, ensuring their perspectives inform relevant and culturally responsive recommendations for practice.

Context of the Research

Within the UK there has been an increase in people seeking asylum (Home Office, 2025), with over 7,000 children classed as UASC (Department for Education (DfE), 2024). This reflects the current global instability, conflict and forced migration. Throughout the pre-migration, migration and post-migration stages, research has highlighted that UASC can encounter complex and potentially traumatic experiences including separation, loss, violence and acculturation challenges (Michultka, 2009). These experiences along with language differences and limited support can impact UASC's experiences of education (Hek, 2005).

The current research takes place within a large college setting, situated in a City of Sanctuary within the UK. This status signifies a welcoming and inclusive environment for all people seeking asylum. The UASC and refugee young people are enrolled on to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses. The college has recently relocated the ESOL department within the college site.

Gaps in the research

UASC's experience of education is relatively under researched, particularly within UK education systems. Whilst there is some research into refugees and the exploration of professionals' views who work with them, there is limited qualitative research exploring UASC's own perspectives, especially within college settings. Subsequently, the current research seeks to provide further insight into the emotional and educational needs of UASC and support educational professionals working with this group.

Positionality and Cultural Sensitivity

Throughout this research it has remained imperative to consider my own positionality, life experiences and the potential influence that this has on my interpretation of the young people's responses during the semi-structured interviews. This refers to my culture, professional background, personal values and previous assumptions about the topic.

Within the data analysis, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was used, whilst I hypothesised that my identity would impact the young people's responses it was vital to remain curious and keep a reflexive diary throughout. This process supported the critical examination of my own interpretations and to note my thinking throughout the coding and theme generation process.

Person-Centred and Reflexive Research Approach

The current research adopts a person-centred approach, which is led by the voices and experiences of UASC. The use of reflexive thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility and emphasis on reflexivity, acknowledging the role of the researcher throughout the data analysis process. This approach acknowledges that meaning is co-constructed between the researcher and the participant.

Theoretical frameworks including Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory supported the structuring of literature and provided a systemic lens where the interaction of wider influences could be explored. Thus, supporting further understanding regarding the impact of varying factors on UASC's and refugees' educational experiences and emotional needs.

Relevance to Educational Psychology

The current research has direct implications for EPs, particularly in how they support schools and colleges in promoting inclusion, wellbeing and academic achievement for UASC. EPs have a pivotal role in supporting vulnerable children and young people, making this research particularly pertinent to the educational psychology field.

The research highlights the importance of systemic thinking, trauma-informed practice, and culturally responsive work. It is important to shed light on the unique challenges many of the UASC face and to explore their views on what has supported them. By creating this awareness, it helps professionals adapt approaches and interventions to meet need. The current research can support schools further with anti-racist practices, trauma informed training, whole school welcoming approaches and providing supervision for staff working with UASC.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis comprises of three parts. Chapter one consists of a literature review, Chapter two is an empirical paper, and Chapter three is a reflective account. Chapter one comprises of a semi-systematic literature review which is structured by using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), literature is explored which focuses on factors impacting children and young people from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds.

The empirical chapter includes semi-structured interviews which have been conducted with seven young people who are classed as UASC within a specific college setting. The interviews set out to explore the young people's educational and emotional experiences. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was used to analyse the data. Subsequently five themes and 10 subthemes were generated. The use of Yardley's (2000) principles of quality within qualitative research is used to critique the research. The implications for educational psychology are discussed and conclusions are drawn.

The final chapter is a reflective account which aims to provide insight into my research journey and the reflective approach that was taken throughout. Strengths and limitations are identified along with the challenges encountered. Proposed dissemination of the research is described and suggestions for future research are identified.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.0 Introduction

This literature review aims to outline and critically evaluate research which explores the factors contributing to effective support for the emotional and educational needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) and refugee children and young people (CYP) in schools and colleges in the United Kingdom (UK). The literature in this review will be explored through an ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) in order to understand how multiple environmental levels influence UASC and refugee CYP. A semi-systematic review approach has been adopted to draw out themes, theories and gaps within the field (Snyder, 2019).

UASC and refugee CYP have often experienced significant adversities including loss, trauma, and hardships throughout their migration journeys (Wood et al., 2020). Despite UASC and refugee CYP being “one of the most socially and economically deprived and discriminated-against” (Pinson et al., 2010, p. 4), there is limited research into their educational and emotional needs, particularly within the UK education system. This gap in the research may be due to political agendas, ethical challenges in conducting research with vulnerable populations, and policy changes which impact the rights of UASC and refugee CYP. Through understanding their experiences and the factors that have supported their emotional and educational needs, this review aims to support policymakers and educational professionals working with UASC and refugee CYP. By providing further understanding of classroom and educational staff practices and supporting their ability to respond to the unique needs of UASC and refugee CYP, it is hoped that this review will promote their emotional health and experiences of educational success.

Burnham’s Social Graces model (2012) provides a comprehensive framework that indicates how various aspects of identity, such as gender, race, age, class, education, and sexuality can impact the experiences of an individual. This framework supports further understanding of the multifaceted identities of UASC and refugee CYP and how this may impact their access and engagement with resources and opportunities. Adopting the Social Graces model can encourage the needs and experiences of UASC and refugee CYP to be considered in policymaking and service provision, ultimately supporting them to feel valued and understood.

For these reasons, I am interested in exploring UASC’s personal experiences of education to improve understanding of best practice to support their educational and emotional needs. I have considered Burnham’s Social Graces (2012) which has supported my reflections on my own positioning. This is an important part of reflexivity within Braun and Clarke’s (2021) approach to reflexive thematic analysis. Whilst I have limited, direct

experience of working with UASC or refugees, as a current trainee educational psychologist with previous experience of working in educational settings as a teaching assistant and as a teacher, I am familiar with how emotional and educational needs are intertwined. Growing up dual heritage in a predominantly White British county, I experienced racism and discrimination during my time at primary and high school. These experiences have increased my understanding of the importance of feeling a sense of belonging. Additionally, I understand that CYP's voices are often underrepresented in research, especially voices from marginalised backgrounds. Therefore, I aim to amplify CYP's voices in order to provide further information about their perspectives, strengths and needs.

The aims and objectives of this literature review and the search strategy will be outlined in the subsequent section, followed by a discussion of key definitions and terminology. The social, historical, and political contexts will then be explored, and the key themes in the literature will be outlined utilising Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979). Subsequently, psychological theories will be analysed before discussing research gaps in the literature and outlining the current empirical study.

1.1 Aims and Objectives of the Literature Review

This literature review aims to critically analyse findings from various research papers and articles to gain a deeper understanding of the complex needs of UASC and refugee CYP. Literature will be explored from the perspectives of educational professionals and also from the views of UASC and refugee CYP. Through exploring perspectives from educational professionals and young people, this review seeks to provide a more systemic understanding of the factors contributing to UASC and refugee CYP's strengths and needs. The current literature review aims to seek out limitations in research, identify gaps in knowledge and also provide ideas for future research. This review will specifically focus on research exploring UASC and refugee CYP in education settings and the factors within this environment that impact their educational and emotional needs. By exploring this topic, the goal is to inform educational professionals and to provide practical insights to ensure UASC and refugee CYP are effectively supported, and their educational and emotional needs are appropriately met. This is particularly useful to the work of educational psychologists (EPs) as well. The British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018) sets out guidelines for the psychologists supporting people from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, shedding light on the instrumental role that EPs have supporting schools and college settings which in turn improves outcomes. They further highlight the importance of understanding the lived experiences of UASC and refugee CYP and taking a holistic perspective to recognise their diversity and resilience.

Due to a lack of UK based research into UASC and refugee CYP, the current literature review will also incorporate international perspectives to explore cross-cultural insights. Factors contributing to the effective support of UASC and refugee CYP's emotional and educational needs will be explored from a global perspective, as there may be learning that can be applied domestically from countries with similar educational, social, and political systems to the UK. Any transferability of principles needs to be applied sensitively and critically as although there may be similarities between western democratic nations, it cannot be assumed that there will be generalisability given variation in the countries culture and education systems. Furthermore, UASC and refugee CYP are a heterogenous group and this diversity may reflect a range of differences in how emotional and educational needs are defined and best provided for.

1.2 Search Strategy

This section outlines the use of a semi-systematic literature review to explore research on UASC and refugee CYP. A semi-systematic review approach was adopted to identify emerging themes, theoretical perspectives, and gaps within the research in order to provide a framework for future research (Snyder, 2019). The following questions guide this review:

1. What does existing literature identify as key factors influencing effective support for the emotional and educational needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) and refugee children and young people (CYP) in schools and colleges?
2. What psychological theories have been identified in existing literature to explain how emotional and educational support affects unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) and refugee children and young people (CYP)?

A semi-systematic review was chosen because it provides the researcher with the autonomy and flexibility to explore references within relevant articles to be included, thus allowing for the selection and collection of relevant literature which adds value to the review. A semi-systematic review is suited to topics that have varied conceptualisations and interdisciplinary perspectives (Wong et al., 2012), which is particularly pertinent in research surrounding refugee CYP and UASC populations, where definitions, policies and contexts differ across research.

The literature referred to within the current review was located using a mixture of websites including, EBSCO, Google Scholar, APA PsycInfo, SCOPUS, and the Web of Science. Chain citation and a backwards snowballing approach (Jalali & Wohlin, 2012) were also used to include significant literature from relevant articles encountered during the

search. This involved following relevant citations and references in order to explore further research.

The search of literature was carried out during the months of August 2023 to May 2025. The literature review was also revisited following data collection and further research was explored to ensure the inclusion of more recent papers and changes in politics and legislation. The review used a combination of broad search terms and more narrow search terms to understand more general trends and also more specific insights. I also incorporated my research supervisor's suggestions of literature following discussions.

The literature search was based on UASC and young refugee CYP's emotional health, academic experiences and sense of belonging. The terms used to search included variations of the following, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1:

Broad and Narrow Search Terms

Search Terms
Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child and Young Person / UASC
UASC / Refugee and education
UASC / Refugee Child / Young Person and Emotional Wellbeing
UASC / Refugee Child / Young Person and Media
UASC / Refugee Child / Young Person and Politics / Political
Teacher Support / Experience UASC / Refugee Child / Young Person
Traumatic Experiences / Hardships and UASC / Refugee Child / Young Person
UASC / Refugee Child / Young Person and Peer and Teacher Relationships
UASC / Refugee Child / Young Person and Language Barriers
Acculturation / Culture and UASC / Refugee Child / Young Person
UASC / Refugee Child / Young Person and Peer and Sense of Belonging

The current literature review prioritises depth over breadth, which is in line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) suggestions that the review does not have to be exhaustive, but only the most meaningful and relevant literature to the research questions should be included.

Research was mainly focused on from Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al., 2010). Research during the search typically originated from the UK, Australia, United States of America, and Germany. Research papers were also included from Türkiye and Jordan, which have received large numbers of Syrian

refugees. Türkiye is also classed as one of the largest refugee hosting countries in the world (Demirci & Kırdar, 2023).

International research was included as there was limited UK based research. International research may offer insights that could be repeated within a UK context. There are some broad commonalities in democratic principles, societal values, education, health, welfare systems and economy. However, whilst the transferring of learning may be useful (Braun & Clarke, 2021), it cannot be assumed and needs to be considered sensitively and critically, especially due to differences in social attitudes, political influences, education and health systems, local policies and UASC and refugee CYP being a heterogeneous group (Yardley, 2000). In addition, there was an emphasis on more recent research due to the ever changing and evolving context. Research was also mostly published and peer reviewed, however I also included unpublished doctoral theses, as they were closely linked to my research, focusing on UASC within education settings in the UK. The empirical study will look more closely at UASC specific research.

2.0 Terminology

The following section will explore the varying definitions and conceptualisations of key terminologies within this literature review. Language is crucial when conceptualising 'refugees' and 'UASC', and definitions matter, impacting on how these populations are legally and socially perceived (Douglas et al., 2019). Labels can be dehumanising, carry negative connotations and highlight power imbalances (Zetter, 2007). Individuals who have been forced to flee their homes and seek safety in a different country are subjected to a range of "legal, bureaucratic and social labels" (Janmyr & Mourad, 2018, p. 544). It is important to understand definitions in order to recognise the additional vulnerability attributed to being an unaccompanied child, in addition to being a refugee or asylum seeking child (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2022). Furthermore, it is important to note that refugees and UASC are a heterogeneous group from a range of cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, religion, varying levels of education, differing traumatic experiences and a range of needs (McGlade, 2023). Subsequently, caution must be taken when responding to the needs of UASC or refugee CYP, and it must not be assumed that their needs are homogenous.

2.1 Refugee

The term refugee is defined within the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention as "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (The Refugee Convention, 1951 article 1A.2). In the UK, an individual will become a refugee when it has been granted by the government

that they meet the Refugee Convention definition. They will subsequently be issued with refugee status documentation and usually given 5 years to remain in the UK before having to apply again (Refugee Council, 2023). However, this definition has since been publicly criticised for failing to include people displaced by natural and environmental disasters (Marshall, 2011). Recent political discourse has also challenged the definition. For example, Suella Braverman, former Home Secretary, argued that the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention is outdated and unsuitable for modern society (Braverman, 2023). This was rejected by the United Nations, they stated that the 1951 Refugee Convention "remains a life-saving instrument" (as cited in BBC News, 2023). This sheds light on broader political beliefs on migration, which can subsequently impact public views and policies, ultimately impacting people seeking asylum or refuge (McBrien, 2017).

The term 'refugee' has legal connotations which can often be misrepresented in the media (Papadopoulos, 2007). Furthermore, it has been disputed whether other terms such as 'migrant' are more inclusive. However, alternative, neutral terms may not acknowledge the unique needs of those who have been forced to leave their homes (Douglas et al., 2019). Some scholars advocate for more inclusive terms such as 'sanctuary seekers', which avoid restrictive, government imposed labels (Jannesari et al., 2020). This apparent lack of agreed consensus with terminology has created difficulties in accurately assessing levels of migration which further fuels misconceptions over actual migration numbers (Economic Commission for Europe, 2012).

Whilst it is acknowledged that other terms for this population may be viewed as less deficit focused, the terms UASC and refugee CYP are used within this literature review to best reflect terminology most commonly used in policies, legal frameworks and by support services. Thus, allowing for consistency with the existing literature and language.

2.2 Person Seeking Asylum

The Refugee Council defines a person seeking asylum as "a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded." (2023, para. 6). Unlike refugees, people seeking asylum do not have legal recognition or rights to remain in their receiving country, which can lead to heightened uncertainty and restricted rights (Edwards, 2024). The term 'asylum seeker' was deemed to be dehumanising by the Refugee Council (2023) and City of Sanctuary UK (2021) as it defines people by their immigration status. Subsequently, this review will use the term 'person seeking asylum' where possible in order to reflect a more person-centred approach.

2.3 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

An unaccompanied asylum seeking child is defined in Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2005) as children “who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so” (as cited in European Parliamentary Research Service, 2016, p. 2).

There is a critical need for research which differentiates between UASC and refugee children who arrive with their families. Whilst both groups of people may experience some similarities during displacement and resettlement, there are legal differences between the terminology and potential psychological differences relating to how refugees and UASC feel and how they are perceived, including uncertainty over their asylum status (Morgan, 2018). This is important as it could help determine how support may need to be adjusted within educational establishments to accommodate these variances. Moreover, UASC have the additional stressor of arriving in their receiving country without their parents or caregivers, which can have a significant, possibly detrimental, impact on their emotional needs (Simmonds & Merredew, 2010).

Consequently, this literature review will primarily use the term ‘UASC’ unless referring to research where participants are classed as refugee children and young people. Whilst it is recognised there will be differences in the support and needs of UASC and refugee CYP, and that they are not a homogenous group, literature relating to both of these groups will be explored within this literature review. This is due to the limited research that is available on UASC specific populations and research does not always make this distinction clear or recognise the possible differences. Additionally, there may be some similarities experienced, and challenges may overlap such as exposure to war and violence and previous limited educational experiences.

2.4 Young People

There are no universal definitions of youth and young people; however, it is commonly accepted that ‘young people’ and ‘youth’ refer to those between 15 and 24 years of age (United Nations, 1985). As such, the term ‘young people’ within this literature review will refer to people within this age range.

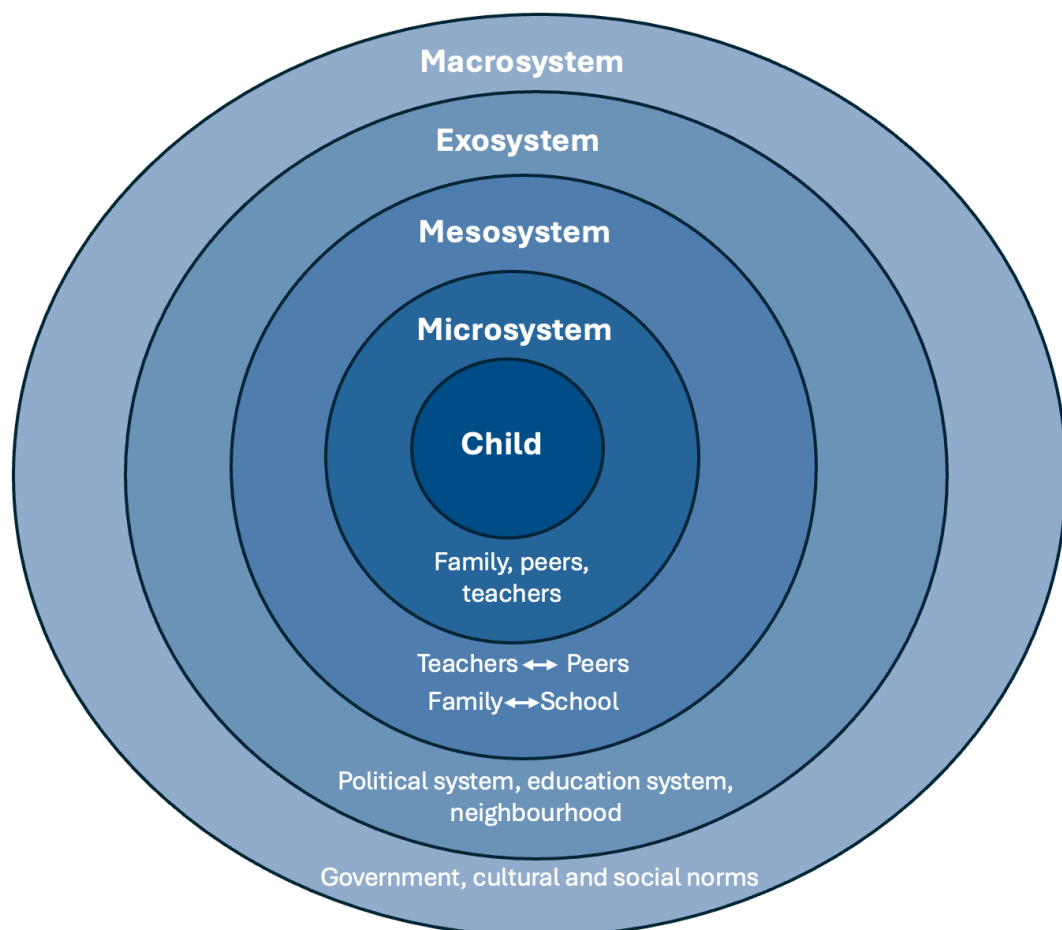
UASC and refugee CYP are recognised as vulnerable populations facing systemic barriers in accessing education, healthcare and employment (Morrice et al., 2020). Given these compounded challenges, it is essential to consider the intersectionality of identities (Crenshaw, 1991). For instance, UASC may encounter multiple layers of disadvantages, including those linked to ethnicity, class, age and sex. Thus, approaches to support refugee CYP and UASC should take into consideration the intersection of their different identities, ensuring that their diverse experiences are adequately represented (Taha, 2019).

3.0 Ecological Systems Theory Framework

This section will draw upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1994) as a guiding framework to explore the emotional and educational needs of UASC and refugee CYP. The ecological systems theory is frequently used by EPs and has also been applied by other researchers in order to shed light on the interacting factors that impact on UASC and refugee CYP (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2024; Morgan, 2018; Sobitan, 2022). This theory suggests a range of biological, cultural and environmental factors influence a child's development. The child is often depicted in the centre, with four nesting circles surrounding the individual in order of impact (See Figure 1).

Figure 1:

A visualisation of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, created by the researcher



The first level is the microsystem, which is in the child's direct environment; this includes relationships such as parents, peers and teachers. The mesosystem is next and

involves interactions between microsystems, such as parent and teacher relationships. The exosystem is the third level and does not directly involve the child, however it still impacts development and includes environments such as local community organisations or local authority policies. Lastly, the 1979 version of the theory includes the macrosystem, which consists of cultural norms, socioeconomic factors and government policies. In 1994, Bronfenbrenner made the addition of the chronosystem, which involves the influences of changes over time. The 1979 version of the ecological systems theory will be referred to more frequently as there is more emphasis on socio-ecological factors and less emphasis on biological issues. This is relevant as the current research is concerned with the educational systems and social-ecological factors around CYP.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) is a helpful framework to guide systemic thinking about UASC's emotional and educational needs. The theory highlights the importance of understanding the complex and interconnected systems in which UASC are situated. By organising the literature into the nested systems, I will explore how each level impacts the educational and emotional needs of UASC and refugee CYP and also explore the factors in the literature that contribute to practical support. The outer layers of the ecological systems will be explored and are useful in providing important context, however the main focus of this review is exploring the microsystem around CYP and how to support their emotional and educational needs which has direct relevance to the work of EPs.

4.0 Chronosystem and Macrosystem

Within the following section, factors in the chronosystem and macrosystem impacting UASC's emotional and educational needs will be discussed. First, I will explore the context of refugees and UASC in the UK, followed by an evaluation of the societal attitudes and national policies that impact on the lives of these individuals.

4.1 UK Context

Statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2023) show that in 2022, 108.4 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced, 35.3 million were refugees and 5.4 million people were seeking asylum. Statistics show in November 2022 there were 231,597 refugees and 127,421 pending asylum cases in the UK (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024a). However, migration is a process which has occurred throughout history, whilst it is beyond the scope of this research to give a detailed history of migration within the UK, it is important to note that migration is not a new issue, but it is a recently politicised issue. Within the UK, legal migration occurred notably following World War II after the British Nationality Act 1948 granted people from the colonies of the former British Empire the right to live and work in the UK. This was encouraged by the UK

Government due to the impact of the war and the need for more workers, an example of this is the Windrush Generation who came from the Caribbean (Kane, 2022; Wills, 2017). The citizens of the European Union also had free movement to live and work in the UK, however over the following decades, policies shifted in an attempt to reduce immigration, leading to increased scrutiny that reflected shifts in political and public discourse (Slaven, 2022). The freedom of movement to the UK ended on 31st December 2020 due to Brexit, a points-based immigration system was subsequently implemented, which is noted to prioritise skills over country of origin (UK Visas and Immigration, 2023). More recently, war and instabilities in countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan and Iraq have led to an increase in displaced individuals, the number of refugees in the last 10 years has tripled (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024b). In recent years there has been the closure of other migration routes which has led to an increase in the use of small boats to enter the UK (Parker et al., 2020). Whilst migration is not a new occurrence (Crawley et al., 2017) or a crisis of the modern day, it is however a current political focus with the media presenting the channel crossings as a negative, novel threat to the UK borders (Maggs, 2020).

Researchers have identified that the political climate can significantly impact the emotional needs of UASC (Bozorgmehr et al., 2023). In order to seek asylum within the UK, the person must be in the UK and is unable to apply for asylum from their home country. In 2022, 76% of claims for asylum were granted even though people may have entered the UK through 'irregular' means, such as small boats or lorries (Right to Remain, 2022). However, in July 2023, the Illegal Migration Act declared that anyone who arrives in the UK irregularly will not have their claims for asylum considered; at the time of writing, this act is currently not in force (The Migration Observatory, 2024a). Despite international law, the UK has made it increasingly difficult to enter the UK in order to claim asylum (Right to Remain, 2022). It is a complex and complicated process to seek asylum. Whilst awaiting a decision on their claim for asylum, individuals will be dispersed across the UK and have no control over where they are sent (The Migration Observation, 2024a). Statistics highlight that in 2023, 67,337 applications were made to claim asylum for 84,425 individuals (Gower, 2023). The number of applications reached a peak in 2002, then dropped to a low point in 2010 and peaked again in 2022 (Gower, 2023). The Home Office (2025) reported that 4,104 claims from UASC were made in 2024. According to the Refugee Council (2023), the UK has approximately 1% of the refugees who have been forcibly displaced. The most common nationalities of people seeking asylum in the UK in 2023 were Afghan, Iranian, Pakistani and Indian (The Migration Observation, 2024b).

The Illegal Migration Act was passed by Parliament on 18th July 2023, which stipulates that any persons entering the UK irregularly will be detained and either sent back to their home country or a third country, such as Rwanda, where they may be able to seek

asylum. This is regardless of what persecution they may face from their home country. Whilst the United Nations Refugee Convention (1951) understood that some people seeking asylum may have to enter the UK via illegal means, this bill signifies it will be impossible for such individuals to seek asylum and remain in the UK. The forcible deportation of people seeking asylum has sparked political debate both nationally and internationally, with many viewing the offshoring of refugees as damaging and having tragic impacts (Collyer & Shahani, 2023). Following the general election in 2024, the Labour Party declared they will be cancelling the Rwanda scheme, and this was carried out in 2024 when the scheme was scrapped. The constant developments within the UK highlight how vulnerable UASC and refugees are to changes in policies and legislation.

4.2 Societal Attitudes Towards Refugees and People Seeking-Asylum

Research has highlighted that xenophobia is increasing in Western Europe along with the rise of right-wing populism (Greven, 2016), which emphasises nationalism and an anti-immigration rhetoric. In contrast, Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers an opposing response to social change, positing that racial oppression is ingrained in society and policies (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT highlights the intersectionality of identities with race and “challenges the experience of White European Americans as the normative standard” (Dixon & Parker, 2023, p. 5). More predominantly, CRT has been used within the United States (US); however, critical race theorists have also argued its relevance within Europe, highlighting that there has been a rise in White European nationalism and racial incidents since the 1980s (Möschel, 2021). Furthermore, researchers have reported there is an increase in Western Europeans who are more discriminatory to those seen as ‘other’ (Dixon & Parker, 2023).

The media has often emphasised a negative depiction of refugees, which has contributed to the growth in racism and cultural insensitivity (German, 2013). Asylum seeking people and refugees are often stereotyped and criticised in the media and in political dialogue (Philo et al., 2013). Due to the frequent negative portrayal of refugees in the media, the term ‘refugee’ has, in some cases, been used as a slur in school environments (Hughes, 2014). Furthermore, there was a notable difference in the media’s portrayal of Ukrainian refugees, with some Western media and politicians representing the Ukrainian people as “more deserving of the world’s compassion and care than other non-white refugees of warfare” (Herat, 2023, p. 511) and receiving preferential treatment (Esposito, 2022; Kohnert, 2022). This problematic portrayal within the media and by journalists has emphasised the racial bias and dehumanisation of UASC and refugee CYP who are people of colour (Ben Labidi, 2023).

Research has highlighted that the perception of refugees, UASC and immigration can be significantly influenced by the media and political figures (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Kaye, 2013). In August 2024, riots broke out across the UK following the murder of three young children in Southport. Misinformation quickly spread on social media, incorrectly suggesting the killer was a person seeking asylum or a Muslim (Choonara, 2024). Notably, Lucy Connolly, the wife of a councillor, tweeted “mass deportation now, set fire to all the f*****g hotels full of the b*****ds for all I care... If that makes me racist, so be it” (as cited in The Guardian para. 2 and 3). The tweet was shared widely, with over 310,000 views (Murray & Ambrose, 2024). Following further tweets and Telegram posts from far-right supporters, violent riots continued to break out nationally and groups attacked hotels which were thought to be housing people seeking asylum (Toth, 2024). These tragic events highlight the powerful role the media and political discourse can have on public attitudes towards refugees and people seeking asylum.

A negative narrative within the media is frequently presented of refugees (German, 2013). Leudar et al. (2008) noted that when examining the presentation of refugees within the UK newspapers, hostile themes were identified, along with the use of dehumanising metaphors. Furthermore, when exploring discourse utilised by the British press when reporting on people seeking asylum and refugees, key verbs used from 1996 – 2005 were “fleeing, sneaking, flooding” (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008, p. 5), inferring a negative association with people seeking asylum. Unfortunately, research of young refugees has indicated that this negative media portrayal can lead to bullying and xenophobic harassment (Mohamed & Thomas, 2017). Research has also highlighted the negative portrayal on social media of refugees, specifically Syrian males, as terrorists, rapists or cowards, popularising the hashtag “refugeesNOTwelcome” (Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016, p. 179).

Meanwhile, other researchers have discovered that when the portrayal of refugees on social media is positive, it can increase compassion towards refugees (Perreault & Paul, 2018). This may be explained by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which utilises the concepts “ingroup” and “outgroup”. The ingroup refers to the group with which the individual identifies, whilst the outgroup refers to groups they do not identify with. Positive portrayals in the media may potentially reduce the feelings of distance between the ingroup and the outgroup, resulting in increased feelings of empathy. This aligns with research which has indicated the impact of direct contact on attitudes; when members of ingroups have contact with outgroups, the attitude of the ingroup is impacted (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

However, there is still a lack of research into the long-term effects of negative media coverage on ingroup and outgroup attitudes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), with the majority of existing studies focusing on the short-term effects of media exposure on perceptions of

refugees (e.g. Hoewe, 2018; Pandır, 2020). Whilst there have been several studies into the impacts of the media and social media on attitudes towards refugees, there appears to be a dearth of research involving the voices of refugees and UASC, exploring their views of how they are portrayed in the media. One line of longitudinal research could explore how attitudes evolve over the years and how the views of refugees change to identify shifts in opinion, especially with changes in UK legislation and, subsequently, changes in the media.

5.0 Exosystem

This section will explore the exosystem which includes reviewing the current legislation, policies, and guidance that may indirectly impact UASC and refugee CYP. This can subsequently impact their emotional and educational needs.

5.1 Education Rights and Legislation

In the UK, refugees and CYP seeking asylum have the legal right to a full-time education; this is recognised within statutory policy Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Education is compulsory within the UK, and local authorities have a legal duty to ensure there is access to education. Furthermore, schools and local authorities must promote race equality and eliminate racial harassment under the Equality Act 2010.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that the academic difference between refugees and their non-refugee classmates is significant and increasing (UNHCR, 2018). Statistics have indicated that resettlement can cause a considerable amount of disruption to school experiences, with only 24% of refugees receiving secondary education (UNHCR, 2018). Additionally, research has indicated that most UASC arrive in the UK aged 14-16 years old, which is when young people are typically studying towards their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) or equivalent (Gladwell & Chetwynd, 2018). Research has also shown a strong positive correlation between higher levels of education and enhanced socioeconomic outcomes; however, it is recognised that uncertainty in individuals' right to remain can lessen the positive impact education has on socioeconomics (Gladwell, 2021).

5.2 Policy Guidance and Good Practice Recommendations

Guidance on Supporting the Education of Asylum Seeking and Refugee Children has been issued by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2004), which details good practice and information on how to support this population. Within the document, there are activities listed which may be useful, such as providing opportunities for free play and using stories to help children understand about moving to a new country. Further listed is guidance

on providing a welcoming environment in school such as ensuring parents and carers are aware of their rights and that interpreters are provided where possible to help the child settle. The guidance notes that rapid language acquisition is vital to successful integration within the UK. This guidance was made with the support of a former Education Adviser at the Refugee Council. However, limited research is cited throughout, and it is important to note that it is based on research and practices from over 20 years ago. Furthermore, there appears to be more of an emphasis on integration rather than inclusion, this suggests the guidance's focus is on supporting the young people to adjust to the current setting, instead of reshaping and changing systems to meet everybody's needs.

In the same year, *Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration*, the Home Office (2004) was issued to recommend better practices and policies for refugee children and young people and guarantee appropriate funding for support staff who speak the languages of the students. The document details guidelines to monitor refugees' attainment in education settings and draws upon the 'Indicators of Integration Framework' developed by Ager and Strang (2004), which identified key domains of integration. It is acknowledged that these strategies are now relatively dated and do not reflect the current, more complex context of immigration. The Home Office has since published the *Indicators of Integration Framework* (2019), aimed at supporting integration practitioners at a local and national level. The Integration Framework is an evidence-based framework, grounded in academic research and made in collaboration with integration researchers. This framework replaces the 2004 version and provides a broader understanding of integration, suggesting that it is multi-dimensional, multi-directional and everyone's responsibility.

There is limited recent guidance which specifically focuses on the education of UASC and refugee CYP beyond basic rights to education. In response to this, some local authorities in the UK have created their own 'good practice' documents, which aim to address specific needs within the community and adapt interventions to the local population. For example, Gateshead Council (2016) has provided 'Education Guidance for Refugee and Asylum Seekers' which has been disseminated to all schools, academies and services within Gateshead council. The guidance includes what educational settings should consider when welcoming refugee CYP and UASC and how to support their transition into school. It also highlights practices such as creating, adapting, and evaluating policies to ensure they are inclusive of UASC and refugee CYP.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015) further emphasises the importance of gathering children's voices and provides guidance for 'new arrivals' and 'English as an additional language'. However, UASC and refugee CYP are not explicitly mentioned, which could impact the quality and consistency of support that they receive. Due to the potential emotional needs many UASC

may experience, guidance within the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice would be beneficial in providing support to staff on how to meet their needs further. In addition, language and educational experiences are barriers to assessing whether UASC and refugee CYP may have additional educational needs, together with many arriving in the secondary stages of the education system, which can lead to the misidentification or difficulty in recognising any special educational needs (The Bell Foundation, n.d.).

Additionally, the Department for Education and Home Office published a safeguarding strategy for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking and Refugee Children (2017a) and statutory guidance regarding the care of unaccompanied migrant children and child victims of modern slavery (Department for Education, 2017b). The publications present strategies and statistics informed by previous legislations and acts including Working Together to Safeguard Children (Department for Education, 2015) and Modern Slavery Strategy (Home Office, 2014). Within the document it states that local authorities must comply with it, however, the possibility of implementing strategies is contingent on resources such as time and funding, which can vary across local authorities, which can lead to inconsistency in care. Subsequently, Home Office data has indicated that there is a “concerning lack of oversight and systematic approach to safeguarding these extremely vulnerable children” (Children’s Commissioner for England, 2023, p. 9).

6.0 Individual Child Level

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1994) posits that the individual child is central within the framework, and that their development is shaped by interactions with their surrounding environment. For UASC and refugee CYP, their unique backgrounds, histories of displacement and range of traumatic experiences will directly impact their emotional and educational needs. Given the diversity of experiences among UASC and refugee CYP, it is important to recognise that each person’s individual needs and background are unique and that they are a heterogeneous group. As Papadopoulos (2002) highlighted, the “loss of home is the only condition that all refugees share, not trauma” (p. 9). However, there are some similar challenges that UASC and refugee CYP encounter. Understanding their needs at the individual level of the ecological systems theory can help to inform the support needed.

The triple trauma paradigm (Michultka, 2009) is a helpful framework for understanding the multiple stages of challenges that UASC and refugee CYP endure. The paradigm suggests that new arrivals are “in the midst of a chronological interaction of three distinct traumatic periods” (Orley, 1994, as cited in Michultka, 2009, p. 145). These three potentially traumatic times consist of pre-migration, migration and post-migration. Pre-migration includes traumatic events from the individual’s home country, such as exposure to

war or violence. The migration period may include events such as limited resources or exploitation. Finally, the post-migration period consists of acculturation challenges, including the loss of identity, isolation and language barriers (Michultka, 2009).

6.1 Pre-Migration Trauma

This section will consider potentially traumatic pre-migration events which occur for UASC and refugee CYP; and these are often immediate and severe. UASC's lives prior to arrival in their receiving countries are often filled with threats and violence. One study audited case files of 100 unaccompanied children seeking asylum and analysed the primary reasons for people fleeing their country; it found death or persecution of a family member to be the most common reason, followed by war, trafficking and education (Thomas et al., 2004). One young person shared, "I came because I had to save my life. The rebels killed my parents in front of me. They burned our house, and my brother died" (Thomas et al., 2004, p. 116).

There is limited but growing research into UASC and refugee CYP's lives pre-migration; most research is focused on their lives post-migration, without exploring their broader experiences or life before seeking asylum (Kohli, 2006; Robinson & Segrott, 2002). Some children and young people also do not wish to share their experiences because they were too traumatic or felt too shocked to share (Kohli, 2006), whilst it appeared others were weary of telling their full stories and experiences out of fear they would be unable to remain in their receiving country (Anderson, 2001). Research has highlighted that for some UASC and refugee CYP, their experience of education pre-migration can differ significantly from the education received in the UK (Fuller & Hayes, 2020).

Further research has indicated that most of the refugee CYP have experienced disruptions to their education (Hanes et al., 2019). Despite many refugee CYP having very limited access to education, the education that was available pre-migration and during migration, was often constrained by resources, school materials and lack of teacher training (Dooley, 2017). This potential lack of previous education can have detrimental impacts on their future education and job prospects (Vaghri, 2019). Further research into the previous experiences of UASC and refugee CYP is subsequently needed in order to inform the support and intervention in their receiving country fully.

6.2 Migration Trauma

The migration phase also poses significant risks, as many UASC and refugee CYP face treacherous conditions when journeying to their receiving countries (Menjívar & Perreira, 2019). The journey during the migration period has been described as a "perilous endeavour with unpredictable border crossings, protection prospects, and settlement

outcomes” (Stratford et al., 2023, p. 1). During the migration process, research has highlighted that individuals can face a range of traumatic events, including sexual abuse, human trafficking, exploitation, extremely long journeys, loss of family on the route and feelings of uncertainty (Hopkins & Hill, 2008; Sourander, 1998; Thomas et al., 2004).

6.3 Post-Migration Trauma

When considering UASC and refugee CYP’s lives post-migration, many arrive alone, without family members or their parents; these transitions bring about profound changes and impacts on one’s sense of self and future (Hopkins et al., 2008). The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the pandemic also left many UASC with poorer access to public services and fewer rights, leaving them unsupported in unsafe situations and with decreased opportunities to build relationships and develop skills (Bhatti-Sinclair, 2021). It has been highlighted that the greater the number of risk factors in one’s life, the more difficult it is to be resilient (Appleyard et al., 2005; Roffey, 2016).

In a UK study conducted in 2014 (Bellis et al., 2014), it was discovered that almost half of the population have experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). ACEs have been defined as stressful experiences from childhood which cause harm to the child or environment they live in, and these may include neglect, physical and sexual abuse (Bellis et al., 2016). When considering UASC and refugee CYP’s lives post-migration, research has indicated that “one of the largest and most consistent contributors to poorer outcomes is the total number of ACEs experienced” (Fazel et al., 2012, as cited in Wood et al., 2020, p. 23). Whilst ACEs can happen to any individual regardless of ethnicity or gender, research has suggested that those from low socioeconomic backgrounds have a higher risk of experiencing increased ACEs than those from high socioeconomic groups (O’Neill et al., 2021). When compared with individuals who do not experience ACEs, those who have experienced them are more likely to experience poor mental health outcomes and even premature death (Hughes et al., 2016). When a UASC or refugee CYP arrives in their country of asylum, they are likely to have experienced a range of ACEs throughout their lives (Wood et al., 2020). ACEs can occur at any point throughout the young person’s migration journey, including after settling into their receiving country. Additionally, there is an increased risk of ACEs occurring for people seeking asylum and refugees if there is parental stress and trauma (Wood et al., 2020).

6.4 Resilience and Adversity Activated Development (AAD)

The triple trauma paradigm (Michultka, 2009) is helpful for understanding the challenges that UASC and refugee CYP may encounter, and it provides people working with this population further knowledge of the subsequent impact trauma may have on their

emotional and educational needs. The model highlights that more guidance to support school staff will be crucial as UASC and refugee CYP may have experienced a range of adverse childhood experiences pre-migration, during their journey and post-migration, including witnessing violence, being abused by others and being deprived of their basic needs (Wood et al., 2020). Whilst this model aligns with research into ACEs and highlights the importance of trauma-informed approaches, the model is deficit focused and portrays UASC and refugee CYP as victims. The model can overlook the strengths that UASC and refugee CYP have and instead focus on their vulnerabilities and trauma. Within the literature, several protective factors have been identified that enable those who have experienced ACEs to continue to still thrive in their adulthood; these include, but are not limited to, social support, education, personality, and dispositional factors (Buchanan et al., 2023). As such, the clear impact ACEs have on emotional needs and physical health highlights significant implications for both prevention strategies and public policy development (Finkelhor, 2018).

Further research by Papadopoulos (2007) has highlighted that despite the traumatic experiences that UASC and refugees have often faced, they can go on to develop resilience and resourcefulness. Papadopoulos (2004) posits that there are three possible effects of trauma: positive, negative and neutral. Negative effects consist of physical harm and psychological distress, whilst neutral effects consist of resilience, and positive effects include 'Adversity Activated Development' (AAD) (Papadopoulos, 2004, 2006). Papadopoulos emphasised that previous literature does not differentiate between AAD and resilience and suggests that resilience is neutral as it involves one not being impacted by severe conditions (2007). AAD may occur following traumatisation and result in the individual gaining new positive developments as a direct result of their experiences (Papadopoulos, 2007). Papadopoulos highlights that there are many accounts of individuals who have "found meaning in their suffering and were able to transmute their negative experiences in a positive way, finding new strength and experiencing transformative renewal" (2007, p. 306).

Similarly, research conducted in England by Stevenson and Willott (2007) highlighted that despite their experiences, barriers and under-support, refugee young people had high aspirations for their future studies. Their research corroborates similar findings to research conducted by Gateley (2015), Hek (2005) and Wilkinson (2016) who also highlighted UASC and refugee CYP's positive attitudes towards education and aspirations for attainment and progress. Furthermore, other researchers have found that despite facing adversity, there are many refugee CYP and UASC who develop resilience, understand the importance of education and are very ambitious and hopeful (Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Ott & O'Higgins, 2019). Thus, reinforcing the importance of research into UASC exploring their strengths and not purely focusing on their needs or vulnerabilities.

These findings reflect the complexities of post-migration trauma and also the resilience and AAD that can develop. In addition to potential emotional trauma (Simmonds & Merredew, 2010), the literature suggests that UASC and refugee CYP may need support with a wide range of issues including learning the language (Morrice et al., 2021), differences in learning needs (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), orientation and understanding of a new culture and society (Berry & Sam, 2006), peer relationships (Sobitan, 2022) anxiety around their asylum application being processed (Morgan, 2018), lack of familial support and limited previous education (Vaghri, 2019). Some of these issues arise due to the context and the complex interactions that exist around the young people, as such they may be addressed by receiving the appropriate support, these will be explored in further detail within the following section.

7.0 Mesosystem and Microsystem

The following section will explore the mesosystem and the microsystem as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1994). Having previously identified areas of emotional and educational needs that may be relevant to UASC and refugee CYP, I am now going to discuss research that examines what factors create an effective mesosystem and microsystem around the child, with a particular emphasis on the school system. My review has identified eight factors within these systems which appear to have an impact of UASC and refugee CYP's emotional and educational needs. These include whole school approaches, specific mental health/emotional support in schools, staff relationships and support, peer relationships, language, cultural representation in education, acculturation and the school environment.

7.1 Whole School Approaches

Many UASC and refugee CYP experience challenges when adjusting to educational environments within their receiving countries. Whether appropriately viewed or not, "education is often seen as a panacea for the trauma, identity issues, communication difficulties, and other problems that they may bring with them" (Damaschke-Deitrick & Wiseman, 2021, p. 100). Despite this belief, school systems are often not prepared to meet the unique needs of UASC and refugee CYP; however, schools that provide a holistic model of education have been considered to reflect best practices (Block et al., 2014). According to Arnot and Pinson (2005) and Block et al. (2014), a holistic model would include supporting refugee children and young people's educational and emotional needs whilst also focusing on inclusion and celebrating diversity.

A whole school approach involves institutional responsibility, recognising that all aspects of the educational setting can affect students' educational and emotional needs

(Sahbegovic, 2017). Targeted holistic and whole school approaches would include fostering relationships with the wider community, supporting staff development, responding to emotional needs through pastoral support, thorough induction processes and extra-curricular activities (Arnot & Pinson, 2005; Pugh et al., 2012). The important role educational professionals have in creating and maintaining welcoming environments is highlighted in research, and that developing these approaches involves addressing whole school policies, practices and culture (Peterson et al., 2017). Leaders within the education setting, such as head teachers and the senior leadership team, are central to ensuring that a holistic and protective environment can be created (Hamilton, 2004; Pugh et al., 2012). Schools that have “leadership which actively promotes ‘believing in the good nature of everyone first, before we start making assumptions about them’ has helped to create that established culture in which deficit views of students are contested by other staff” (Pugh et al., 2012, p. 134).

In a UK context, Arnot and Pinson (2005) identified that positive and welcoming attitudes of staff and other pupils in the school setting are vital, including a celebration of diversity in order to create an inclusive education setting. In later research, Arnot and Pinson (2010) shared that there are noticeable differences between schools that encourage and hold discourses of inclusion compared to those that are concerned about performance. Moreover, social inclusion is a significant factor in supporting UASC and refugee CYP, this consists of targeted support, whole school approaches and a curriculum which serves diverse needs and perspectives supporting CYP to feel like they belong and have meaningful contributions (Block et al., 2014; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Social inclusion encompasses celebrating diversity and maintaining a whole-school approach (Pugh et al., 2012; Rutter, 2001).

Australian research by Harradine (1996) identified whole school reform as an approach to support refugee CYP with the systemic challenges they encounter. Whole school reform refers to changes that can be made to schools’ structure, culture and pedagogy in order to improve outcomes for all CYP (Harradine, 1996). The research into holistic and whole-school approaches for UASC and refugee learners is limited but growing; however, a large proportion of the research is conducted in an Australian context. Subsequently, further research into whole-school approaches is needed within the UK educational system in order to inform whole school reform aimed at creating positive change for UASC and refugee CYP.

McIntyre and Hall (2020) explored barriers to the inclusion of refugee and children seeking asylum in schools in England and discovered that changes in national and local immigration policies have had an adverse impact on the inclusion of these young people. Interviews with headteachers indicated that they felt frustrated at the lack of resources. They

also found that the curriculum was rigid, requiring more flexibility and as such, the curriculum did not meet the needs of children seeking asylum and refugees. The researchers subsequently concluded that there is a need for national and local authority policy reform in order to promote the inclusion of this population (McIntyre & Hall, 2020).

7.2 Specific mental health/emotional support in schools

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (WHO, 2001, p.1). This is a shift from other definitions which viewed mental health as a condition characterised by the absence of mental illness (Galderisi et al., 2015). Despite this shift, the WHO definition has been critiqued for being potentially misleading; as such, researchers have sought to develop a new definition which is more inclusive. This proposed definition states that “mental health is a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society...” (Galderisi et al., 2015, pp. 231-232). This is interesting when applied to UASC and refugee CYP as they have the additional challenge of integrating into a new society in a different country and culture.

As aforementioned, UASC and refugee CYP will often arrive in their receiving country having experienced or witnessed atrocious acts and violence (Bean et al., 2007). Subsequently, research has highlighted the detrimental impact this can have on their mental health and emotional needs (Erucar et al., 2018; Lustig et al., 2004). Statistics indicate that up to one third of UASC settling into a European country are perceived to have been impacted by a mental health illness (Lelliott, 2017). Those arriving unaccompanied are also more likely to have experienced traumatic situations and have an increased risk of developing mental health difficulties in comparison to accompanied asylum seeking children and young people (Derluyn et al., 2008; Fazel et al., 2012). Additionally, in a systematic review exploring mental health needs across European countries, researchers discovered that UASC and refugee CYP will experience more significant challenges to their physical health and wellbeing in comparison to children from the general population (Kien et al., 2021). Similar findings indicate that the prevalence of mental health problems is higher in UASC than in the general population (Huemer et al., 2009). Findings across numerous studies have concluded that young refugees and UASC can experience elevated levels of a range of mental health disorders, including psychopathology, depression and anxiety (Fazel et al., 2012; Howard & Hodes, 2000; Javanbakht et al., 2019). Despite this prevalence, many UASC with mental health difficulties are not accessing or receiving support from mental health services (Sanchez-Cao et al., 2013). When mental health referrals are made,

evidence has indicated that UASC are less likely to attend appointments when compared to accompanied youth seeking asylum (Michelson & Sclare, 2009). This indicates that the absence of a parental advocate can significantly impact the experiences of UASC when seeking support in their receiving country. Further research has identified that the lack of engagement in mental health support may be due to the Westernised forms of talking therapies, which are not culturally relevant to refugees and UASC, thus impacting and reducing engagement (Chase et al., 2008; Nasir, 2012).

It is also important to consider how mental health challenges encountered by UASC and refugee children intersect with barriers to accessing education. Rutter (2006) identified that there are many limitations for refugee children accessing education within the UK, which is in part due to the government's "unwillingness to be seen as being supportive of refugees" (Rutter, 2006, p. 153). This is further corroborated in a more recent case study (Codina & Szenai, 2024) which identifies that there are still many barriers impacting UASC and refugee CYP's education.

Despite these barriers to accessing education, research has indicated that school settings are often the best place to support the emotional development of refugee children and young people (Fazel, 2015). Berger et al. (2012) noted that there has been an increased number of targeted interventions delivered to support the social and emotional needs of children and young people impacted by war and traumatic events. However, most of these were delivered by trained professionals and not by teachers (Berger et al., 2012).

As previously mentioned, schools are identified as key settings to support UASC and refugee CYP's emotional needs, subsequently research has evaluated specific school-based interventions aimed at supporting those impacted by trauma. Sullivan and Simonson's (2015) findings indicate that school-based interventions are effective in supporting refugee and war traumatised young people who have trauma-related symptoms. A range of interventions were reviewed, however the interventions which are shown to be most consistent in their effectiveness were Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) based. Ehntholt et al. (2005) found there were short-term improvements to stress, behavioural and emotional needs in response to a CBT intervention. Their sample consisted of 26 11-15 year olds who were classed as refugees or young people seeking asylum, they received a school-based CBT intervention over six weeks focusing on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which was delivered by a clinical psychology trainee. They further suggested that teachers could be trained in order to deliver manual-based interventions within the classroom setting which would support capacity building in schools. Similarly, findings from Beehler et al. (2012) discovered that interventions which were delivered within the school setting can successfully support UASC and refugee CYP in a non-stigmatising way and increase relationships with school staff.

In a systematic review of literature conducted by Jordans et al. (2009), it was noted that there is a scarcity of rigorous research exploring the impact of psychosocial care for children and young people who have experienced war. The authors found increasing support for community-based intervention over a clinic-based approach, nevertheless research was very limited in defining what this meant. Additionally, within their study, a disconnect between research, policy and practice was identified, subsequently suggesting the need for further evidence-supported interventions to support children and young people impacted by violence and war (Jordans et al., 2009).

Across studies, it appears that PTSD is the most common mental health concern among young refugees (Morgos et al., 2008; Soykoek et al., 2017). Nickerson et al. (2011) noted that trauma focused CBT was most impactful for refugee adults who had PTSD. The researchers further stressed the importance of offering 'multi-modal' services to refugees and their families, which aim to address a broader range of psychosocial challenges. However, trauma measures, assessments and diagnostic tools must be acknowledged within each piece of research as these tools were mainly developed for Western adults; as such, they may not have cross-cultural validity and reliability (Hollifield et al., 2002). One study, with a relatively large sample size of 1,366 participants across five different countries in Europe, explored both refugee and non-refugee migrants' mental health and compared their experiences of emotional needs (Spaas et al., 2022). The results indicated high levels of PTSD amongst all refugee young people; in addition, perceived discrimination was linked to higher levels of mental health difficulties. The study builds upon findings from a wider piece of research exploring the effectiveness of a psychosocial intervention on migrants in secondary school, Refugees Well School (RWS), a European Horizon 2020 study, confirming that refugee youth are at a heightened risk of mental health difficulties.

In addition to structured therapeutic interventions, research has also highlighted the importance of collaboration between school staff and mental health professionals (O'Shea et al., 2000). O'Shea et al. investigated the implementation of a mental health service designed to support the needs of young refugees. The young people were identified by teachers as needing further support and subsequently they were referred to an outreach mental health professional. O'Shea et al. (2000) found that the refugee children referred to the intervention benefitted and showed reductions in the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which is a psychological assessment tool for children and young people. Despite being relatively dated and having a small sample size, this research highlights the importance of early intervention and the collaboration between health professionals and school staff. One further critique of research that explores interventions supporting the emotional needs of UASC and refugee CYP, is the use of quantitative measures to assess their impact (Morgan, 2018). Further qualitative measures, such as semi-structured interviews and observations,

should be used in order to elicit richer insight, more culturally sensitive research and to directly explore UASC and refugee CYP's experiences and perceptions of the interventions.

7.3 Staff Relationships and Support

There is increasing literature which suggests that “individual teachers often have greater effects on student outcomes than schools do” (Christie & Sidhu, 2002, p. 5) and having effective teaching staff can have significant impacts on the educational success of UASC and refugee CYP (Pugh et al., 2012). The role of teachers is especially critical for UASC, as they often face school alone and without their parents or primary caregivers. Morgan (2018) identified UASC as “some of the most vulnerable children attending UK schools and colleges” (p. 19). As aforementioned, research has indicated that UASC may also need psychosocial support from school staff due to their previous, possibly traumatic experiences (de Wal Pastoor, 2015). UASC and refugee CYP's success in educational settings is closely linked to meeting their emotional needs to ensure they are feeling secure and regulated and subsequently ready to learn (Maslow, 1943). Additionally, the need for psychological interventions, may be reduced if UASC's accommodation needs are met and they feel adequately supported, which can also positively impact their academic success (O'Higgins, 2019). UASC have identified the importance of relationships with others, including teachers and peers, in order to support their needs (Horgan & Ni Raghallaigh, 2017). Furthermore, teachers who spend time learning about UASC's experiences and show an understanding of their strengths can positively influence their educational success (López, 2017). International research in Belgium has indicated that strong relationships with staff members at schools have also been linked to a reduction of emotional needs for UASC (Mels et al., 2008).

Educational environments and educational professionals are central in fostering a sense of belonging for UASC (Ward, 2022). Ward highlighted the important role teachers and educational establishments have in supporting UASC's sense of belonging within the UK by developing trauma awareness, engaging in reflexive practices and effectively communicating with those who have low levels of English. Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed that “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p.497). They further suggested that without having a sense of belonging, one's sense of wellbeing will greatly diminish. This links with findings from Chase (2013) which highlight that wellbeing is also about having a sense of belonging and hope for the future. In order to create this sense of belonging, school staff must have an awareness of UASC's experiences before arriving in the UK (Ward, 2022).

The importance of positive student-teacher relationships has also been highlighted through research carried out in an Australian context, which identified how these positive relationships led to an increased sense of security and sense of belonging (Baak, 2016). In addition, research by Kaur and Szorenyi (2020) revealed similar findings that show the importance of student-teacher relationships and their impact on refugees' sense of school belonging. Ridley et al. (2019) also highlighted the correlation between refugees' sense of school belonging and their positive relationships with teachers. In Walick and Sullivan's (2015) research, they explored the need for teachers to have genuine knowledge and interest in young refugees' experiences of adjusting to their receiving countries in order to build strong, effective relationships with them.

Good practice documents, including those by Doyle and McCorriston (2008) and Arnot and Pinson (2005), highlight the need for parental involvement, strong links with the community and the importance of liaising with other agencies. Unfortunately, for many UASC, parental involvement is usually not possible, subsequently education staff may have an even more important influence in the absence of this support. In the absence of parental support, educational staff become increasingly significant in supporting UASC's educational experiences.

Research has noted that teachers of UASC should have previous experience of teaching students from culturally diverse backgrounds and that they should be supportive and championing of UASC and refugee populations and celebrate diversity (Arnot & Pinson, 2005). Prentice (2022) also advocates for an increase in school staff who have previous experience working with UASC and refugee learners, as they are better equipped to understand their needs and have more positive attitudes towards them.

Subsequently, it has become increasingly important to ensure that all education staff have the necessary knowledge and have received the appropriate training. In Norway, research by de Wal Pastoor (2015) highlighted the importance of staff being trained adequately in order to support the needs of unaccompanied young refugees. Peterson et al. (2017) concluded in their review that education is pivotal in supporting the inclusion of UASC within their new communities, highlighting the importance of training and development in order to support staff to better respond to the needs of UASC and refugee CYP. In a German context, similar findings identified teachers and their knowledge as vital to whole school approaches for the inclusion of refugees (Timm, 2016). In addition, Owen-Hughes (2020) shared that facilitating professionals' capacity to work with children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds "is a humanitarian issue and should therefore be a priority for governments and policy makers" (p. 73).

Further findings show the importance of teachers creating a welcoming school environment for refugees and UASC as the first and crucial step to facilitating a quality

education (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). Madziva and Thondhlana (2017) in their article based on a previous ethnographic pilot with 57 participants identified a welcoming environment as being attuned to the needs and emotions of the students, celebrating diversity, promoting inclusive spaces and supporting access to services and resources. The researchers also note that it is vital for school staff to motivate their students and to raise awareness amongst other young people and their parents in order to promote inclusion and create a supportive and encouraging environment (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017).

A lack of support from school staff can have detrimental impacts on children and young people, including absenteeism, disengagement and difficulties sustaining peer relationships (Porche et al., 2011; Watson, 2009). Subsequently, there is a need for teachers and staff to support UASC and CYP both academically and in a pastoral capacity (Stewart, 2011). Stewart (2011) highlighted how some teachers went “far beyond merely teaching students” (p. 133), supporting and advocating for them both in school and out in the wider community. In their book, McIntyre and Abrams (2020) include a range of case studies which identify the importance of staff employing inclusive strategies, providing emotional support and using trauma-informed practices. School staff should also have an understanding and develop an awareness of the impact bullying, language barriers, confusion regarding classwork and trauma may have on UASC’s behavioural presentations within the school environment (McBrien, 2005). Collectively, this body of research suggests that support from staff must be informed and should be embedded across whole-school practices.

7.4 Peer relationships

Education has been widely recognised internationally as a system to integrate UASC and refugee CYP into their receiving communities and to improve their opportunities for connecting and socialising with others (AbuJarour, 2022; Beirens et al., 2007; Dereli, 2018). Through forming connections with others, UASC and refugee CYP’s sense of confidence can increase, and their sense of isolation can decrease (Stanley, 2001). More recent research has explored the educational experiences of young refugees who are unaccompanied within the UK (Fuller & Hayes, 2020). Through the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), six unaccompanied asylum seeking minors’ experiences were explored, finding that tailored support, consideration of wellbeing, and the importance of peer support and networks were of great significance to unaccompanied young refugees. These findings further corroborate the conclusions from Hek (2005).

Previous research also identified the importance of peer support both from peers from their home country and from the UK (Nasir, 2012). Nasir found that peers from their home country enabled the young refugees to share experiences as they held the same cultural identity, whilst peers from the UK helped them to learn about UK culture and develop

their language skills. Both Nasir (2012) and Fuller and Hayes (2020) identify the importance of peer networks and how these relationships support unaccompanied refugees.

Sobitan (2022) found within his educational psychology doctoral research which consisted of semi-structured interviews with seven students from refugee backgrounds, that refugee students experience feelings of safety when they have a peer support group with whom they have shared experiences and language. In addition, Mels et al. (2008) highlighted how having peers from similar backgrounds or who were at similar stages in the asylum process, facilitated settling into their receiving country. Eriksson et al., (2019) revealed that for UASC, peer relationships are especially important as they have been separated from their families, subsequently friends being like a “new family” (p. 383). Furthermore, Rutter (2001) identified the positive impact on UASC when they have peers support them who also speak the same first language. Researchers Brodsky and Marx (2001) referenced this as having a micro-community within the macro-community. In addition, previous literature has indicated that positive peer relationships can serve as a protective factor for school success (Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Wilkinson, 2002).

Whilst peer relationships are considered to be beneficial to the social development of UASC and refugee CYP, Taylor and Sidhu (2012) argue that discrimination and systemic inequalities can negatively impact social connections, sometimes adding to marginalisation. Further research has indicated that refugee students can be subjected to bullying, prejudice and discrimination from their peers (Moinolnolki & Han, 2017). Subsequently, ‘buddy’ programmes, as suggested by the City of Sanctuary (2021), may facilitate UASC and refugee CYP to connect with peers in a supportive way (Conti et al., 2024).

7.5 Language

Supporting refugees and UASC’s English language development is crucial, as limited knowledge of English can lead to difficulties in peer relationships, self-confidence and academic progress (Morrice et al., 2021). In a large-scale UK-based study, Morrice et al. (2021) employed focus groups with 33 refugees and 280 refugees completed questionnaires. One participant highlighted that “communication is the first thing to have a good integration. You can’t have a good integration when you don’t have a good communication” (p. 687). This reinforces the notion that language is fundamental for refugee CYP and UASC when they are attempting to settle into their receiving country. However, Morrice et al. (2021) noted that despite some refugees being proficient in English, their access to higher and further education is often negatively impacted by limited funding and spaces for English language qualifications. Tikly (2018) highlights the need to improve the allocation of resources to support the education of individuals who do not speak English as their first language.

One seminal paper by Hek (2005) based on a small scale qualitative study (Hek & Sales, 2002) explored through interviews the experiences of young refugees in the UK and the impact of education on their migration experience. This research builds upon previous findings from Hek and Sales (2002). Hek (2005) used interviews and focus groups to collect data surrounding refugees' experiences of education within the UK. The researcher identified barriers to education, which included language differences and a lack of appropriate support. Furthermore, recommendations made by Hek (2005) suggest that policymakers and educators need to address barriers for refugees in order to ensure fairer access to education, including language support, psychological support, and the creation of inclusive environments. Through in depth semi-structured interviews, Hek and Sales (2002) previously explored how language barriers can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. This echoes later findings from UK based research from Ager and Strang (2004) and Farmbrough (2014), who discussed the importance of UASC wanting to improve and develop their English language skills in order to support their cultural integration, learning and social relationships.

Within a Lebanese context, UNICEF (2012) found that language remains the most significant barrier to inclusion and impacts individual's ability to access education. Similarly, Anderson (2004) noted that UASC who struggle to acquire a second language can experience greater risks of exclusion. Subsequently, researchers in Germany have suggested that structural changes should be made, including employing bilingual educators who speak the first language of UASC and are thus able to provide safe linguistic spaces (Timm, 2016).

Limited resources for English as an additional language (EAL) support within education settings can impact the progress of UASC and refugee CYP, as highlighted by Bourgonje (2010). Within their case studies from the UK, Australia, Spain and Sweden, Bourgonje explored inclusive education. Bourgonje (2010) shed light on programmes in UK schools to support the development of language skills for English as an additional language (EAL) pupils. However, resources were limited and as such, interventions were not carried out as hoped. Teachers also indicated that they felt under-supported in carrying out their jobs to meet the educational and emotional needs of refugee and asylum seeking children and highlighted the need for further training (Bourgonje, 2010). Further interviews found that some colleges and schools felt that the EAL departments were under-resourced and underfunded (Doyle & McCorriston, 2008).

Researchers have called for more research to be carried out into language skills as there is limited research exploring young refugees' literacy levels, which is subsequently impacting the ability to provide evidence-based support for educators (Fleckenstein et al., 2012). This targeted research would inform educational policies and practices in order to better support the integration of UASC and refugee CYP.

7.6 Cultural Representation in Education

Inclusion in education aims to eliminate “exclusionary processes that are a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in relation to race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and perceived abilities” (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018, p. 2). This has recently evolved from inclusion in education being viewed as an approach to cater to children with special educational needs (Opertti et al., 2014), to a broader definition of creating inclusive environments for all children and young people from a range of backgrounds (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018).

Education plays a central role in supporting the integration of UASC into their receiving countries, highlighting the importance of training and development in order to support staff in better responding to the needs of children seeking asylum and refugee children (Peterson et al., 2017). However, systemic challenges remain; Spicer (2008) suggested that within the UK, there are numerous factors which can increase social exclusion for asylum seeking children and young people, including poverty, limited support to services, and language support.

Educational settings are increasingly expected to support the process of adjusting to a new culture and country (Schachner, 2019). As such, education can be viewed as having “transformational potential if it is organised by considering students’ cultural differences” (Karabacak et al., 2025, p. 2). Education can also help to address disparities and challenges encountered by children and young people from different cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2015). Culturally responsive education is focused on respecting and valuing students’ cultural backgrounds, encouraging them to grow personally and academically whilst supporting them in developing their critical awareness (Gay, 2018). There is growing research into culturally diversified curriculums, however there is a lack of research into how culturally responsive education is being implemented in national education policies and everyday school practices. Subsequently, further research is needed in order to create a consistent, standardised, culturally responsive practice in classroom environments (Schachner, 2019).

Culturally relevant pedagogy refers to the teaching methods and strategies which operate within the broader concept of culturally responsive education. This can be viewed as the foundation for positive learning experiences for all learners (Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016). Culturally relevant pedagogy requires systemwide adaptations and should include encompassing the vast experiences and self-perceptions of new arrivals, their learning styles and demand for changes in policies and staff (Gay, 2018; Paris, 2012). Ladson-Billings (2023) suggests that teachers who engage in practice that is culturally relevant are able to “deconstruct, construct and reconstruct the curriculum” (p. 36), which involves rebuilding and transforming the curriculum to reflect the needs of all students, especially

marginalised communities. Despite this, research into this type of culturally relevant pedagogy often draws upon the views of educators or academics but is often limited in eliciting the young person's voice.

Barriers to education for refugees and UASC can include schools having limited awareness of cultural traditions and lacking recognition of diversity (Hek, 2005). These barriers are often based on misconceptions that UASC and refugee CYP are deficient or lacking, and educators can often fail to recognise and value the learners' cultural backgrounds (McIntyre & Neuhaus, 2021). Research has suggested that educational settings can learn from refugees' and UASC's experiences in their community, such as at home and in faith groups, offering valuable insights for developing more inclusive practices (Kaukko & Wilkinson, 2020).

Timm (2016) found it was important to have policies to support the integration of refugees in educational establishments in Germany, focusing on the culture of both the receiving country and the refugees to foster belonging and integration. These included recommendations such as liaising with multi-professional teams, including psychologists within schools to support UASC's wellbeing, having multilingual educators, and training for teachers in order to prepare them for working with different cultures (Timm, 2016). A global review commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), including surveys with 501 UNHCR staff and focus groups with young refugees, has suggested that it is questionable whether the needs of young refugees are adequately met by policies in place in countries which receive vulnerable people seeking asylum (Evans et al., 2013). It is therefore important for future research to explore the policies and practices in place in different countries regarding the integration of refugees and further explore how they could be improved to assist the settling in of UASC and CYP into their receiving country and school.

7.7 Acculturation

According to Fazel et al. (2012), acculturation is the process of an individual participating in their receiving country's culture whilst maintaining their own culture. Berry's (1997) acculturation theory explores the process that individuals experience when adjusting to a new culture. Berry identified that when UASC and refugee CYP take part in intercultural experiences, it can have an impact on their mental health, which is termed 'acculturative stress' (Berry & Sam, 2006; Berry, 2009). The levels of 'acculturative stress' can depend on the way individuals are treated by their receiving country, with more hostile environments and negative societal attitudes leading to greater acculturative stress levels.

Despite all the hardships that many UASC and refugee CYP may have encountered, as well as the challenges experienced with adjusting to new cultures, refugees often show

resilience (Lustig et al., 2004). In their mixed methods study, Mohamed and Thomas (2017) conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 refugee CYP, three refugee parents and 63 staff in addition to the refugee CYP carrying out the Multi-dimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale. Mohamed and Thomas (2017) shed light on the importance of family and friend relationships, a supportive school environment, and successful acculturation on young refugees' emotional needs.

Further research has indicated that it is important for UASC to have connections with their home culture, particularly maintaining their religion which can provide consistency, stability, and reassurance (Farmbrough, 2014). Within interviews with 18 female and 14 male unaccompanied minors in an Irish context, Ni Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) discovered that the majority of their participants found that maintaining their home culture, including their religion and having the same food and language, served as a coping strategy when adjusting to life in a new setting. Ni Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) highlighted that discussions with others from similar backgrounds about their past enabled their culture to be "an explicit part of their lives in Ireland, rather than a hidden part of their private selves" (p. 229). Raghallaigh (2011) added that religion can support unaccompanied CYP to cope with the challenging situations they encounter. Further research by Handlin (1973) also identifies that religion and religious institutions can provide continuity and structure for the cultural transitions that UASC encounter when moving to a new country.

Kohli (2011) further identified that UASC "who keep their faith of origin, and are given opportunities to practice their religion, appear to fare well in hostile contexts" (p. 319). In addition to cultural and religious continuity, they have also suggested that language proficiency is a key factor in the successful acculturation of refugee populations as it impacts on social, occupational and educational contexts (Fleckenstein et al., 2012).

7.8 School environment

Within the UK, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses are designed for non-native English speakers over 16 years of age. Many colleges across the UK offer ESOL courses; however, funding for ESOL has changed over the years, and UNICEF (2018) have called for the government to increase the number of ESOL hours which are funded in order to improve UASC and refugee CYP's experiences of education. Subsequently, limited access to ESOL can impact the integration and have a wider impact on the lives of some UASC (Doyle & O'Toole, 2013). Research into ESOL courses has indicated that having a designated ESOL space can create a secure atmosphere where students who do not speak English fluently can learn without feeling judged, which could subsequently lead to an increase in their motivation to learn English (Sidaway, 2023). However, in some situations, learners are being segregated into separate areas of education

settings (Golden et al., 2014), which may lead to some UASC feeling further ostracised from their peers.

Contrasting international perspectives show a more nuanced view. Research carried out in the United States of America explored schools which exclusively serve immigrants who are learning English, they argue that these institutions are not isolating the young people from society but are respectful and nurturing of the marginalised communities, which serves to strengthen society (Jaffe-Walter & Miranda, 2020). It is further argued that in the UK, schools should explore how they can offer spaces for refugee young people and UASC to positively explore their shared experiences with each other and avoid the racialisation and exclusion and feeling forced to adopt “British values” in the classroom (Lander, 2016; Saleh, 2021). Conversely, Abla and Al-Masri’s (2015) international research highlighted that shared educational spaces for young people seeking asylum and native speakers can foster social cohesion and create more positive perceptions when compared to educational spaces in which they were taught separately.

8.0 Psychological Theories Applied in the Literature to Explain the Experiences of UASC and Refugee CYP

In order to further understand the emotional and educational needs of UASC and refugee CYP, psychological theories can be used to provide critical frameworks for analysis. Psychological theories can offer valuable insights into the impact of trauma, acculturation and why certain types of support may be more relevant, effective and culturally appropriate. Furthermore, psychological theories can also support navigating away from a deficit view by providing strength-based approaches that acknowledge the resilience and agency that UASC and refugee CYP can develop in response to the experiences they may have encountered. Educational and emotional needs are closely linked; whilst support for mental health and emotional needs is important, school-based support and interventions may provide a broader and potentially less stigmatising alternative (Thorley, 2016).

One psychological theory that provides a critical framework for understanding trauma and resilience further is Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943). Maslow identified that individuals must have their physiological and safety needs met, including access to shelter, food and protection from harm, prior to focusing on their psychological needs, such as esteem and self-actualisation. When considering UASC and refugee CYP, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs highlights how an individual will be unable to develop feelings of resilience or a sense of identity until they feel safe and secure.

This aligns with the triple trauma paradigm (Michultka, 2009) and helps to provide an understanding of the sequential needs that UASC and refugee children may experience at different stages. As aforementioned, the triple trauma paradigm identifies pre-migration,

migration and post-migration as three primary trauma phases which significantly impact one's emotional and educational development. Whilst acknowledging that UASC and refugee CYP's experiences will be different and varied, many may have encountered trauma during the pre-migration and migration phase. Subsequently, in the third phase of the triple trauma paradigm, the support of educational settings and professionals will be crucial in providing a secure, protective environment. Pre-migration and migration trauma may impact basic physiological and safety needs and increase feelings of isolation. In line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, once basic physiological, safety, health and care needs are met in the receiving country that is peaceful, stable and has accessible welfare, education and health care systems, then higher order needs can be met. These will involve connection and belonging and once these are established, UASC and refugee CYP can begin to develop feelings of hope and self-efficacy. Subsequently, they will be able to begin to engage with education further.

Understanding risk and resilience factors which potentially influence UASC's experiences is essential for delivering effective support. Aleghfeli and Hunt's (2022) systematic mixed methods review identified risk and resilience factors which offers a practical lens for understanding the risk and resilience factors that may exist for UASC. In accordance with Rutter (2006) and Masten (2014), Aleghfeli and Hunt define resilience as positive outcomes which stem from adverse childhood experiences. They further identify that risk factors are linked to negative experiences which are contextually specific, constructed and different within each population. Aleghfeli and Hunt's review identified risk and resilience factors and the importance of a socio-ecological understanding in considering the multi-directional systems that influence the needs of UASC and refugee CYP. This perspective informs professionals' practice in delivering effective, targeted support and care to UASC in an emotional and educational capacity. Aleghfeli and Hunt also identified resilience factors such as supportive relationships, strong community networks, employment support, financial support access and positive school environments. Whilst identified risk factors included harmful asylum policies, racism, and discrimination, poor residential care, limited prior education and higher age at admission to school.

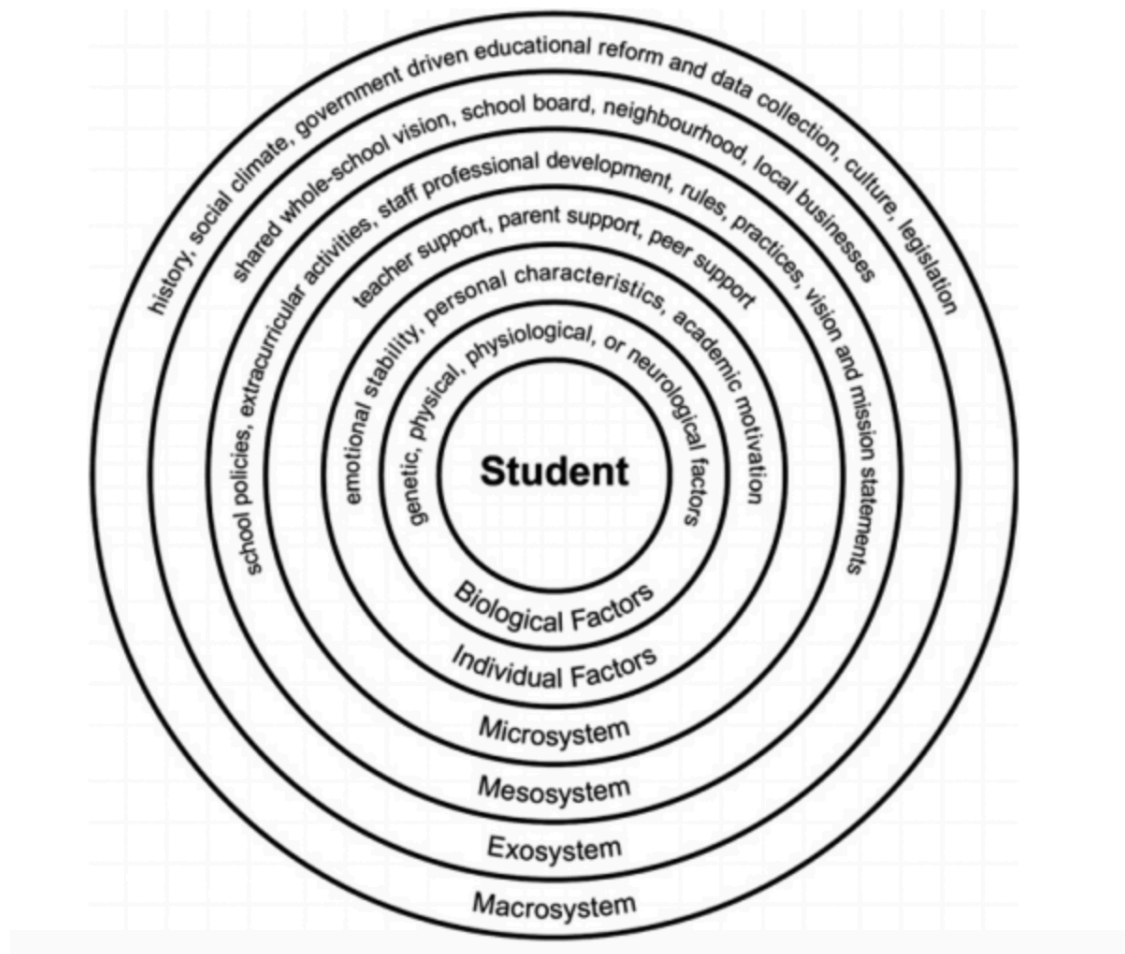
Papadopoulos (2007) also discusses risk and resilience when presenting the trauma grid framework. This framework explores the three effects that trauma could possibly have which include negative, neutral and positive. Papadopoulos suggested that negative effects consist of psychiatric disorders, and human suffering, whilst Adversity Activated Development (AAD) is a positive effect and can lead to transformative renewal. Papadopoulos, however, conceptualises resilience as a neutral effect of trauma which differs to Aleghfeli and Hunt's (2022) definition of resilience being a positive concept.

One commonly identified protective factor for UASC and refugee CYP is a strong sense of belonging within the school environment (Smith & Culbert, 2024). The concept of school belonging is a helpful lens through which to understand how education environments can further support and promote educational and emotional development. Willms (2003) defined school belonging as a psychological construct involving feelings of attachment to school whilst feeling accepted and valued by peers and staff. Smith and Culbert (2024) conducted a review exploring relevant articles regarding school belonging which provides useful definitions and key concepts contributing to and impacting school belonging. They refer to Goodenow and Grady's (1993) definition of school belonging; "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others – especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment" (pp. 60-61). However, Smith and Culbert (2024) recognise and highlight the importance of peer relationships on school belonging too. When specifically exploring refugee populations' sense of belonging, Smith and Culbert identify how UK-based research found that buddy schemes positively impacted all children and young people at school, especially those from migrant backgrounds (Manzoni & Rolfe, 2019). Further studies highlight that developing refugee CYP's school belonging positively impacts social inclusivity, and school belonging can serve as a protective factor against vulnerability (Cardeli et al., 2020; Schweitzer et al., 2021). As highlighted in Aleghfeli and Hunt's (2022) risk and resilience framework, supportive school environments are instrumental in developing resilience in UASC and offering stability. This theoretical perspective has also been applied to understanding the experiences of other potentially vulnerable groups such as students at risk of exclusion, disengaging or underachieving (Raufelder & Kulakow, 2022; Pendergast et al., 2013).

Conceptual models of school belonging can support further understanding of the various factors that influence belonging. Allen and Kern's (2017) bio-psycho-socio-ecological model (BPSEM) of school belonging is a valuable conceptual framework, highlighting the complexities of belonging. Sobitan (2022) applied the BPSEM in the context of refugees within his research, highlighting that research has considered refugees and UASC in the context of belonging. The BPSEM suggests that school belonging is influenced by a range of interactions at multiple levels and systems (Figure 2).

Figure 2:

The BPSEM, taken from Allen and Kern (2017)



The BPSEM, focuses on the ecological and relational factors of school wellbeing, offering a holistic perspective. Allen and Kern (2017) acknowledge that their model is developed from a westernised perspective, which may exclude certain factors which are important to others from culturally diverse backgrounds. Despite this limitation, the BPSEM supports a relational, strength based perspective. Furthermore, within their research, Allen and Kern shed light on a review conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2009) which identifies four factors which are crucial in fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness within a school setting, these included adult support, belonging to a positive peer group, commitment to education and the school environment (p, 5).

Research conducted on refugee young people found that those with a stronger sense of school belonging were associated with having lower levels of depression and higher feelings of self-efficacy (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). Research also emphasises the

importance of social connection for refugees' sense of belonging (Ager & Strang, 2004; Phillimore, 2012). While social connection is important, many people seeking asylum are housed in socially deprived areas, which can contribute to exclusion and social deprivation (Kearns & Whitley, 2015). Additionally, experiences of racism and discrimination within schools and communities can hinder belonging and lead to further feelings of ostracism (Fozdar & Hartley, 2014).

Despite these risk factors, Hek (2005) noted that education is a critical factor in supporting the integration of young refugees in the UK and contributes to a sense of belonging. Research in an Australian context indicated that a classroom which is inclusive and caters to all children contributes to a sense of belonging (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Further literature highlighted that refugee children shared that they felt safe when peers and staff respected and were interested in their culture and religion (Sobitan, 2022), which can subsequently impact feelings of school belonging (Allen et al., 2018). In addition, relationships and support from the community can enhance young refugees' sense of belonging (Philimore et al., 2012), and that those who engage with their receiving countries' community can develop a stronger sense of belonging (Ward et al., 2001).

Psychological theories such as Maslow's hierarchy, the triple trauma paradigm, trauma grid, risk and resilience framework and BPSEM offer useful tools for understanding the impact of previous traumatic experiences on UASC and refugee CYP's needs. Certain theories, however, may be more relevant and applicable during different phases of UASC's lives. For example, Maslow's hierarchy would be more relevant to UASC when they have first arrived in their receiving countries in order to ensure their basic needs and feelings of safety are met before any educational and emotional development. It is important to highlight that some UASC will require specific trauma support, however, for some individuals the experience of school itself may address many of their needs and act as a source of stability, support and connection. Being in a school environment where they feel supported and safe may then support the development of communication skills, friendships and aspirations and hopes for the future. When considering UASC's school experience, psychological theories centred on belonging, such as the BPSEM, become increasingly relevant. The BPSEM is also aligned with the support and guidance that EPs can provide, offering a strength based, socio-ecological lens and highlighting the complex interacting factors impacting school belonging.

9.0 Summary

This literature review has examined a range of relevant research in order to gain insight into the educational and emotional needs of UASC and refugee CYP, additionally reviewing the complexities of definitions of key terminology. The review has also explored

the support provided to UASC and refugee CYP in educational settings and the risk and resilience factors that can impact their development.

Within the current review a range of factors have been identified which are important in order to meet the educational and emotional needs of UASC and refugee CYP. The review has identified that many UASC have experienced three phases of trauma (Michultka, 2009), including experiences of war and separation (Thomas et al., 2004), treacherous journeys leaving their home countries (Wood et al., 2020), and difficulties settling in and feeling included in their receiving countries (McIntyre & Hall, 2020). Despite these adversities, the findings from the literature have indicated that education staff and educational settings have the potential to create positive change and support a sense of belonging in UASC and refugee CYP (Karabacak et al., 2025; Peterson et al., 2017). Research further identified that social connection and supportive peer and teacher relationships are crucial in developing a sense of belonging (Fuller & Hayes, 2020; Nasir, 2012; Ridley et al., 2019; Sobitan, 2022). The role of supporting students to overcome language barriers has been considered a key factor in UASC and refugee CYP's emotional and educational development (Morrice et al., 2021; Tikly, 2018; Timm, 2016). In addition, the review identified that supportive and welcoming staff is important to support UASC and refugee CYP when adjusting to life in their receiving countries (Arnot & Pinson, 2005; DfES, 2004; Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017; Peterson et al., 2017).

The literature review has also revealed helpful theories to explain how emotional and educational support affects UASC and refugee CYP, including Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) and Aleghfeli and Hunt's (2022) risk and resilience factors. In addition, Allen and Kern's (2017) Bio-psycho-socio-ecological model (BPSEM) of school belonging along with Smith and Culbert's (2024) review has been useful in understanding more about the importance of fostering a sense of belonging. Although, the current research is not going to be a theoretically driven analysis, I will draw and reflect upon the most appropriate theories which will support me to explain the generated themes. These psychological theories provide valuable insights into different contexts and different stages of experiences that UASC and refugee CYP may have encountered, and some theories will be more relevant at certain times. It is important to note that these theories may not be culturally responsive, as such it is important to apply these theories with caution and sensitivity. Furthermore, by gaining the views of young people, we can explore the appropriacy of these theories and whether they match with what young people value.

It is also important to acknowledge that the majority of the research used within this review has come from WEIRD societies (Henrich et al., 2010). I especially focused on research from the UK, however existing research was limited, as such I expanded my search to include international research too. This highlights the need for caution when transferring

findings across populations (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and the need for ‘sensitivity to context’ (Yardley, 2000) when reporting research. Most of the literature included was from smaller scale research and used qualitative methods such as Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (e.g. Farmbrough, 2014; Fuller & Hayes, 2020) or thematic analysis (e.g. Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Morgan, 2018), or were reviews (e.g. Peterson et al., 2017; Smith & Culbert, 2024). The research within this review gathered a range of perspectives including UASC and refugee CYP and also those who support and work closely with this population.

While previous research has explored the emotional needs of UASC (Chase et al., 2008; Chase, 2013; Kohli & Mather, 2003), there are gaps in the literature, particularly exploring college aged young people’s perspectives in the UK and how emotional needs are intertwined with educational needs. Furthermore, there is limited research from EP’s perspectives, with the exception of doctoral theses from trainee EPs (e.g. Morgan, 2018; Owen-Hughes, 2020; Sobitan, 2022). The current research seeks to add to this growing body of literature and focus specifically on the educational experiences of UASC within a UK college setting. The use of interviews in the current research aims to allow for a deeper exploration of UASC’s voices to be listened to and heard in “an unadulterated form” (Robinson, 1998, p. 122). The current research employs the use of semi-structured interviews with UASC attending a college within a rural county in the UK and seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What factors do Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) find important to support their emotional and educational needs in a United Kingdom (UK) college setting?
2. What psychological theories explain how these factors may influence the emotional needs and education of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) in a United Kingdom (UK) college setting?

Chapter 2: Empirical Paper

Abstract

There is an increase in the number of people claiming asylum (Home Office, 2025) within the United Kingdom (UK), along with ongoing global instability and potential traumatic experiences that individuals may encounter when seeking asylum, it is pertinent to explore their views in order to provide tailored support. Whilst there is a small but growing body of research exploring the perspectives of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), this study seeks to add to this to support professionals and educational psychologists (EPs) working with this population and further understand UASC's views.

The current research explores the experiences of UASC within a UK college setting and the potential impact on their emotional and educational needs. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with seven participants who were classed as UASC and attended a specific college setting. The data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) which provided five themes and 10 subthemes. The five themes consisted of: "Staff Support and Guidance", "The Role of Meaningful Relationships", "The Importance of Language as a Facilitator and Barrier", "The Impact of the College Environment" and "Aspirations, Hopefulness and Optimism".

This research highlights the importance of a number of key factors which may help to support UASC's educational and emotional development. These include secure relationships and attachments, supportive staff, inclusive practices and welcoming environments. This aligns with school belonging theory and feelings of connectedness, particularly features identified within the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study (2009) and may provide a useful way of understanding the positive impact that aspects of the school microsystem may have on the emotional and educational needs of UASC. This research offers practical tools to support UASC's educational experiences and wider implications for EP practice are outlined.

1.0 Introduction

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) are defined as "those who are younger than 18 years old who have been separated from both parents, are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, has a responsibility to do so" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2005). As of 31st March 2024, there were 7,380 children looked after who were classed as UASC in the United Kingdom (UK) (Department for Education (DfE), 2024). According to the UK Home Office (2024), there were a total of 4,104 claims made from UASC in 2024, with Afghanistan identified as the most common country of origin in 2023.

Under the statutory policy Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), UASC have the right to a full-time education in the UK. The lives and education of UASC are shaped by several policies and legal frameworks, including the Children Act 1989 and 2004 which classes UASC as Looked After Children (LAC) which entitles them with additional educational and social care support. Furthermore, the Equality Act 2010 protects UASC from discrimination based on their age, sex, race, religion or immigration status. The Keeping Children Safe in Education (DfE, 2024) stipulates that educational settings have a duty and responsibility to safeguard all children and those that are seeking refuge. Given the increase in people claiming asylum (Home Office, 2025), and the ongoing global instability, it remains imperative to explore the perspectives of UASC in order to further support their educational and emotional needs.

Cultural sensitivity is vital when conducting research with individuals from diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Throughout this research, I recognise that UASC are a heterogenous group and acknowledge that their experiences will differ pre-migration, during migration and post-migration. Whilst their experiences will be varied, identifying shared themes in research may help to further understand their needs and strengths, particularly within educational settings.

The following section will provide a summary of existing literature relating to the educational experiences of UASC. Within the main literature review I have identified factors contributing to effective school systems to support UASC and refugee children and young people (CYP). Often research combines UASC and refugee populations, whilst there may be common principles, there are also differences between the two groups which are important. For UASC these differences include arriving in their receiving country without parents, and the psychological impact of awaiting a decision on their claim for asylum (Doyle & McCorriston, 2008; Morgan, 2018). Appendix A provides a table outlining the research included in the Chapter 1 literature review which has specifically explored UASC. The table of research highlights the importance of education as offering stability, opportunities for social integration and a place to seek emotional support (Fuller & Hayes, 2020; Ward, 2022). The research further sheds light on the specific traumas and potentially traumatic experiences that UASC may have encountered, and the subsequent mental health needs and targeted interventions required (Farmbrough, 2014; Hopkins & Hill, 2008; Kohli & Mather, 2003). Additionally, the literature focuses on specific challenges of being UASC, including feelings of uncertainty and awaiting an asylum decision regarding their status (Chase & Statham, 2013; Kohli, 2011). Another common principle identified the importance of collaboration between services in order to better support UASC and to foster their sense of wellbeing, belonging, hope and stability for their future (Chase et al., 2008; Chase, 2013).

While insights into research exploring UASC have been set out within the table, there is a notable lack of existing research of UASC specific studies. There is more research into refugee populations, however it can be difficult to transfer findings to UASC populations without careful and sensitive exploration. This highlights the need for further research to be conducted with UASC specific populations in order to better understand and support these CYP.

1.1 Local Context

The current research was conducted in a city in England and is classed as a 'City of Sanctuary' for all people including those seeking asylum. The City of Sanctuary movement originated in Sheffield in 2005 and has since increased rapidly across the country to cities that were receiving high numbers of people seeking asylum (Darling, 2010). A City of Sanctuary signifies a welcoming and inclusive environment for those seeking asylum. The City of Sanctuary UK Charter (2021) describes their values including inclusivity, openness, participation, inspiration and integrity. Since the National Transfer Scheme Protocol for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, which was updated in 2023, there has been more distribution of UASC across the UK in order to reduce local authorities becoming overwhelmed. As of 2023, the specific county the current research took place in has predominantly young men seeking asylum, from countries including Afghanistan, Albania, Eritrea, Iran and Syria (Name withheld, 2023). The current research takes place within a college setting. The college has approximately 270 asylum seeking young people and refugees enrolled on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses. The college website highlights that they have a commitment to welcoming children and young people seeking sanctuary and share the importance of multi-agency working and a trauma informed practice approach.

1.2 Barriers to Education for UASC

Many UASC have experienced significant psychological and emotional challenges prior to arrival in their receiving country which can have a significant impact on their educational progress. When arriving in the UK, UASC often have encountered traumatic experiences including death, persecution of a family member and witnessing war (Hjern et al., 1998; Thomas et al., 2004). During their migration to the UK, they may also encounter stressors including unmet basic needs, loneliness, a diminished sense of self and feelings of uncertainty (Chase & Statham, 2013; Edwards, 2024; Passarlay & Ghouri, 2015). Once UASC have arrived in their receiving countries they can continue to experience challenges including difficulties adjusting to their new environment and culture, lack of certainty regarding their immigration status, having no parents or caregivers, and lack of sense of

belonging (Farmbrough, 2014; Hamilton, 2004; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010).

These experiences may put UASC at an increased risk of developing mental health issues (Mohnani et al., 2023) and require access to mental health services and highly skilled education staff. However, there are barriers impacting UASC from accessing services, due to perceived stigma, mistrust and providers' lack of cultural competence (Hayon & Oates, 2025).

UK based research has identified that those from asylum seeking backgrounds will often arrive in the UK following disrupted education (UNHCR, 2018). Furthermore, many UASC will have limited proficiency in English, which can lead to communication barriers and difficulties with making friends (Morgan, 2018). Language barriers can impact academic progress for some UASC (Fry, 2007), whilst for others it can lead to feelings of embarrassment and fear of talking and interacting with others (Farmbrough, 2014; Korac, 2003).

Building on these challenges, the uncertainty of UASC's refugee status can have severe impacts on their mental health due to the lack of stability and can lead to trauma-induced stress (Given-Wilson et al., 2016), highlighting the need for timely psychological interventions. In addition, the age of UASC on arrival will impact the amount of support and care that can be received, and this can also differ between local authorities (Wade, 2017). These findings suggest that UASC aged 16-17 may encounter more barriers and challenges when compared to UASC who are younger, due to limited funding and the semi-independent accommodations they are placed in, which can often be deemed inappropriate to meet their needs (Crawley, 2007). Furthermore, UASC can be subjected to oppressive and degrading age assessments if there is doubt regarding their age (Crawley, 2007). All of these elements can negatively impact UASC.

The integration of UASC into the UK can also be difficult due to the prevailing political climate, which can foster unsympathetic societal attitudes towards UASC (Lewis, 2005). There is a frequent portrayal in the media of immigration and people seeking asylum causing increased economic burden and impacting the safety of the UK, thus creating an environment in which UASC may encounter prejudice and discrimination (Crawley et al., 2019). Within the school or college setting, these societal and political attitudes can manifest into social exclusion, bullying, racism and limited access to resources (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006). Thus, it remains important for school staff to be vigilant and ensure appropriate actions and sanctions are put in place to challenge racism and bullying (Morgan, 2018).

A further barrier is the absence of a parental advocate, which can negatively impact the accessing of mainstream education for many UASC (Fazel, 2015). Separation from parents can be damaging to the emotional needs of UASC, highlighting the subsequent

need for long-term interventions and specialised support to help them in navigating their receiving country (Simmonds & Merredew, 2010). Often, these long-term interventions require specialised support, which many teachers lack and feel unequipped to provide (Ward, 2022).

1.3 Protective Factors

Whilst it is crucial to understand the challenges that UASC encounter, it is equally important to highlight their strengths, coping mechanisms and protective factors. In doing so, it is possible to build a holistic understanding and explore effective strategies and support which facilitate UASC's educational journey and social integration (Farmbrough, 2014). Whilst previous research has focused on the challenges UASC face when accessing education (Morgan, 2018; Wade et al., 2012), more research is needed to explore the factors that contribute to their sense of belonging and social, emotional and educational needs in UK college settings.

Schools and colleges serve as primary environments where children and young people spend a substantial amount of time, consequently these settings play a pivotal role in their development and are often best placed to support UASC's emotional needs (Fazel, 2015). Smyth et al. (2015) highlighted that UASC viewed education as vital for accessing social support and developing their resilience. Support systems for UASC are crucial and research has shown that social support can increase resilience and positive emotions (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008). Furthermore, Canadian research has highlighted that social support and peer networks can mitigate the impact of pre- and post-migration stressors and adverse experiences (Denov & Akesson, 2013). Within the literature, UASC have identified a variety of people who form part of their social network including foster carers, social workers, friends and teachers (Horgan & Ni Raghallaigh, 2017). Friends, in particular, can be viewed by some UASC as a coping strategy through distraction and to avoid having to think about previous difficult experiences (Groark et al., 2011). Whilst for other UASC, friends and being socially recognised was seen as motivation to seek psychological help where needed, to increase academic engagement and to make more friends (Fazel, 2015). Research has also highlighted the impact of friendships on feelings of safety for UASC, especially when friends are from a similar background and have shared experiences and language (Sobitan, 2022). In addition, research has indicated that UASC view developing peers from the UK as supporting their development of English and strive to find more friends who are also British (Fazel, 2015; Nasir, 2012).

UASC's experiences of schools and colleges can also be greatly impacted by the support available, especially if teachers hold negative attitudes and lack cultural competence or knowledge of UASC's experiences (Hek, 2005). Hek clarified the significance of

welcoming and understanding attitudes from teachers and the importance of support as UASC can feel humiliated if they do not understand the task in class or feel that they are not being listened to. Particularly for UASC in colleges, it remains important that they receive pastoral support and English as an Additional Language (EAL) support, otherwise this can have a profound impact on their confidence levels and subsequently their academic and emotional development (Ott & O'Higgins, 2019).

To deepen understanding of school belonging, Smith and Culbert (2024) conducted a comprehensive review exploring a range of international and UK based research on the concept of school belonging. School belonging can be defined as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others – especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp. 60-61). Research included in the review emphasises that having strong feelings of school belonging can greatly improve outcomes for students (Craggs & Kelly, 2018), in addition it can also positively impact academic attainment, feelings of drive and engagement (Hagenauer, 2020). For many children and young people seeking asylum and refugees, they can encounter additional barriers to developing a sense of belonging, including cultural and language differences (Sobitan, 2022). The Bio-Psycho-Social-Ecological model (Allen & Kern, 2017) provides an interactionist and ecological perspective of school belonging, highlighting the complex systems which impact on an individual's sense of belonging. Building on this in their review, Smith and Culbert (2024) also outlined several key protective factors that can support the development of school belonging, including strong teacher-student relationships, positive peer relationships and engagement in extra-curricular activities (Allen et al., 2018). Further small-scale UK based research into extra-curricular activities found that a dance intervention supported migrant children in a secondary school to develop confidence and connection with others subsequently impacting their sense of belonging (Ritchie & Gaulter, 2020). Research has also recognised that school connectedness can serve as a protective factor that includes how CYP develop a sense of belonging to their educational environment (Libbey, 2007).

There is a small but growing body of research which includes the perspectives of the young people. By including the voices of CYP, the research amplifies the experiences and needs of UASC and considers their views. This is critical for ensuring that policies and practices reflect their lived experiences. More recent research has explored experiences of education for UASC within the UK (Fuller & Hayes, 2020). Through the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), UASC's experiences were explored, finding that tailored support, consideration of emotional needs and the importance of peer support and networks were of great significance to unaccompanied young refugees. It is important to explore these

findings further within a specific UK college setting, with an emphasis on the educational experiences of UASC, told from their perspectives.

2.0 Rationale and Aims of the Study

Given the current political climate and the increasing number of UASC arriving to the UK, it is important to explore the views and experiences of UASC within educational settings. Understanding UASC's perspectives is crucial to being person centred and culturally sensitive and to creating impactful and effective support mechanisms in schools and colleges. Research indicates that high-quality education can serve as a protective factor for mental health problems and promote emotional needs and resilience, highlighting how meeting emotional needs may be closely entwined with social inclusion, language development and engagement with learning (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2022; Gladwell, 2021). Thus, the current research is concerned with exploring the views of UASC attending a specific college setting within a rural county in England.

The current research has significant relevance to the educational psychology field, as EPs have crucial roles in promoting the inclusion and emotional needs of children and young people. There is limited research exploring UASC's views from an EP's perspective, except for trainee EP's doctoral research (e.g. Farmborough, 2014; Morgan, 2018; Owen-Hughes, 2020; Sobitan, 2022). EP's five core functions set out by The Currie Report are consultation, assessment, intervention, research and training (Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED), 2002). Some of the core competencies of EP's practice when working with children from refugee backgrounds, involve working holistically, liaising with other professionals and having cultural competence (Due & Currie, 2022). The British Psychological Society (2022) further identifies that a core competency of the EP role is to recognise and respect cultural differences and the unequal access to support. By eliciting the voices of UASC the current research can provide support for EPs by highlighting the lived experiences of CYP from asylum seeking backgrounds. This can inform holistic formulations, increase multi-agency working and encourage culturally responsive practice which addresses unequal access to support.

Research by German (2008), addresses how EPs working with refugee communities in multi-disciplinary teams are "well situated to facilitate support, knowledge and empowerment for refugee parents working across the various systemic levels" (p. 99). Furthermore, Delaney (2025) explored EP's experiences of working with CYP from refugee backgrounds in Ireland, highlighting the importance of cultural humility, awareness of potential power bias and the need for further training and supervision. Sobitan (2022), also noted the need for EPs to be reflective practitioners and utilise the bio-psycho-socio-ecological model (BPSEM) of school belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017). The BPSEM suggests

that school belonging is influenced by a range of factors interacting in the biological, individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Allen & Kern, 2017).

2.1 Research Questions

There is limited research exploring the perspectives of UASC within UK college settings.

There is a need for research to amplify the voices of UASC in order to inform educational professionals' practice to better support the emotional and educational needs of CYP from asylum seeking backgrounds. The current research seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors do unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) find important to support their emotional and educational needs in a United Kingdom (UK) college setting?
2. What psychological theories explain how these factors may influence the emotional needs and education of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) in a United Kingdom (UK) college setting?

3.0 Methodology

This section will now provide an outline of the research design, rationale for the approaches used in the thesis, ethical considerations and procedures used for data analysis for the current research.

Given the nature of the research and the potential vulnerability of the young people taking part, including factors such as their cultural diversity, age, gender, asylum seeking status and religion (Crenshaw, 1991), engaging in personal reflexivity and considering my positionality is essential. Milner (2007), along with other researchers, have identified the need to reflect on the identities of the researcher and the participants in order to explore the impact on the research outcomes. Utilising Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexivity prompts, I acknowledge that I occupy some positions of social 'privilege', such as being a non-migrant. However, I also acknowledge that I occupy positions of social marginality, including being female and of dual heritage. I recognise that my life experiences differ to those of the young people taking part in the research, and that I am likely to be viewed as different due to factors such as age, nationality, religion, language and gender. As such, I sought to learn more about the young people's needs and presentations in the college prior to data collection, through conversations with staff members and observing the students in the communal areas.

Gunaratnam (2003) highlights that race and ethnicity are significant parts of qualitative research, and that the identity of the researcher can impact the interactions with

the research participants. As such, it is important to hypothesise, that my identity potentially will impact the young people's responses to my questions, however through reflexivity, I aim to remain critically aware of these dynamics and approach the analysis with understanding of my own positionality.

3.1 Research Paradigm

Ontology is concerned with the study of 'being' and the structure of reality (Crotty, 1998). Epistemology is concerned with theories of knowledge, it questions what knowledge is and how claims about knowledge are justified (Ejnavarzala, 2019). Ontological and epistemological positions can both influence one's understanding and thinking about the world (Meem, 2020), as such it is vital that researchers are able to explain their philosophical positions.

Epistemological positions can range from positivist to social constructivist with positivist approaches being associated with quantitative methods and objective measurements, whilst relativist approaches often align with qualitative methods (Dieronitou, 2014). The current research adopts a relativist ontological stance using a social constructionist lens. Social constructionism posits that there are multiple realities that exist (Weenink & Bridgman, 2017). Through this lens I seek to gain further understanding through exploring the experiences of individuals. The epistemological and ontological stance aligns well with the focus on socially constructed experiences and the diverse realities of marginalised groups.

A relativist ontology recognises that participant's views are context-dependent and influenced by social, cultural, and institutional factors (Pretorius, 2024). UASC's views on emotional needs and the support available within their college will reflect their individual realities which have been shaped by factors including nationality, religion, gender, age and socio-economic status. Social constructionism has been chosen as the current research seeks to explore UASC's experiences through gathering rich data and human experiences that cannot be quantified. Through thematic analysis the desire is to explore UASC's understanding of their emotional needs and the support available within the college, acknowledging how their views, thoughts and feelings have been shaped by social structures and the cultural context of the wider setting. Through a constructionist lens "language is conceptualized, as creating rather than simply reflecting meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.8). A social constructionist viewpoint shares that knowledge of the world is formed from discourses, interactions, and cultural norms as such there is not one truth (Burr, 2015). This fits with the current research as I will be describing the participants' experiences which are subjective to them. In addition, it is vital to acknowledge the impact of the researcher during the data analysis as they interpret and co-construct the experiences

shared through their own constructs. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2022) highlight the key differences between qualitative and quantitative research paradigms, sharing that the researcher is a subjective storyteller and the purpose is to gain rich, in-depth understanding whereby smaller sample sizes are valued. In line with this proposition, the current research employs Big Q qualitative research, as conceptualised by Braun and Clarke (2021). This perspective recognises that meaning is co-constructed between the researcher and the young people, thus reflecting my active role in the analysis of data. My deep engagement with the data involves understanding the young people's experiences by drawing on my own positionality, values and prior knowledge. Thus, acknowledging the "inescapable subjectivity of research and the researcher" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 228).

3.2 Design

The research collected qualitative data; the data was investigated using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) which is a qualitative approach to analysis. Qualitative research is particularly effective for studying marginalised groups, as it allows for a deep exploration of their experiences and perspectives. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was selected for the current research, instead of interpretative phenomenological analysis, due to lesser emphasis on exploring individual personal narratives. While such narratives are highly valuable, and it is important to acknowledge that the young people in this research may have encountered traumatic experiences, the primary focus is to identify and explore themes relating to young people's current educational experiences and their support systems from their own perspectives.

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection for this research took place in one phase and involved the use of semi-structured interviews. These semi-structured interviews were conducted with UASC who attended the specific college setting and met the sampling criteria. The participant inclusion criteria consisted of being an unaccompanied asylum seeking child, having at least six months attendance at the college and having sufficient English language skills to engage in the interview. This involved ESOL groups equivalent to young people working at or towards GCSE English Language.

Semi-structured interviews are deemed to provide rich, detailed data providing insight into the participants' experiences (Adams, 2015). Researchers have argued that semi-structured interviews are helpful when wanting to explore in great detail a certain topic and fully understand the participants' perspectives (Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

Intentionally not all questions were pre-planned, however many were informed by the literature review. The questions focused mostly on the young people's experiences of the college, the support already in place, and their perspectives on the additional support which may be beneficial. The semi-structured interview questions can be seen in Appendix B. In developing the questions, I considered Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1994) and Aleghfeli & Hunt's (2022) risk and resilience framework, particularly exploring friends and teacher relationships further. I also considered positive responses to adversity such as Adversity Activated Development (AAD) (Papadopoulos, 2004, 2006).

Furthermore, prior to the data collection phase, informal visits were carried out. This consisted of informal observations of the students in communal spaces and engaging in discussions with pastoral and teaching staff at the college in order to develop a deeper understanding of the setting. Time was also spent reviewing the college's website and the college's Ofsted report, which notably did not reference the ESOL department. It was noted that many UASC at the college were from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Sudan. Each UASC is allocated an education support worker and a tutorial supervisor to provide holistic support for their education and emotional needs. UASC and refugee CYP are on a full-time timetable when attending college, with most students attending three days a week. They have around 16 hours of teaching which is mostly ESOL and classes consist of around 18 students. Furthermore, there was a recent change to the college which involved the relocation of the ESOL department from a busy corridor at the front of the college to a building adjacent to the main building. This area has modern furnishings, workspaces and a social seating area. The impact of this relocation was not yet clear to staff. Whilst it might provide a quieter, less busy learning environment, it had the potential to affect the UASC's sense of inclusion and their interaction with peers in the wider college setting.

During my visits to the college and through conversations with pastoral and teaching staff, I observed there were multilingual displays, a range of national flags mounted on the walls, organised trips and regular extracurricular activities such as a very popular cricket club. Subsequently, knowledge from these conversations and observations were used to support the young people's recall during the interviews and encourage deeper responses.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the research project was gained from the University of East Anglia School Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee (Appendix C). The research ethics application was completed in accordance with the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (The British Psychological Society, 2021) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) standards of conduct, performance

and ethics (2024). Furthermore, the British Educational Research Association (BERA; 2018) guidelines were considered.

Hopkins (2008), identified key ethical considerations when conducting research with UASC, including the notion that ethical issues should be considered throughout the research, not just when applying for ethical approval. Hopkins further highlighted the importance of informed consent, privacy and confidentiality.

Young people who wished to be part of the research were shown a presentation (Appendix D1) and given an information sheet and consent form (Appendix D2). The information sheet was purposefully written to be easily understood by children and young people, as I was taking into account that English is their second language. As the participant group was over 16, parental consent was not necessary. However, it was important to gain consent from the participants' social workers or personal advisors in addition to participant consent, giving them a fair chance to provide voluntary informed consent (Appendix E). Following consent from social workers and personal advisors, the participants were contacted again to arrange a time and place at the college to carry out the interview. A location was selected which ensured the young person felt comfortable to share their views in a confidential space. Before the interviews began, the young people were reminded of the research aims and were provided with the questions. They were given time to ask any follow up questions and to clarify the meaning of any words. Consent to record the interviews was also reconfirmed.

It was acknowledged that the young people participating in the research may have experienced traumatic events, as such questions were framed in a positive way and avoided exploration of difficult experiences in order to mitigate distress. Recognising that some young people's English language skills were less developed, I ensured I spoke slowly and clearly and gave time for them to ask for clarification when needed. Other scaffolding included rephrasing questions, providing examples and simplifying language where needed such as clarifying what was meant by "accommodating religious practices". Following the interviews the young people were given a debrief sheet (Appendix F), this was explained to them, and participants were also asked if they had any further questions.

Data management within this research followed the Data Protection Act 2018, UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy. All recordings were stored on the OneDrive system. Participants anonymity was assured by assigning a number in accordance with the order the interviews were carried out.

3.5 Young People

Following ethical approval, opportunity sampling was used to recruit potential participants. Subsequent to gatekeeper consent being obtained, I was introduced to a key contact at the identified college and arranged the gathering of potential participants and a time to meet with the ESOL department and present a PowerPoint that would explain what the research aims were and what taking part would involve (Appendix D1). Once consent was given, their social workers or personal advisors were contacted to gain informed consent. A total of 13 participants gave consent to be in the research, two participants were excluded as they did not consent to being recorded. As set out in the ethics application, only participants who consented to being recorded would be able to participate, this is due to me being unable to transcribe and represent their views accurately, which would affect the reliability of analysis. Numerous follow up phone calls and emails were made to contact social workers and personal advisors in order to gain their consent. Following social worker and personal advisor consent, four participants did not respond to my emails attempting to arrange a time for the interview to take place. It was difficult to organise the interviews with the young people at times as they have numerous appointments outside of college and are only in college three days a week, furthermore there is a high amount of absenteeism.

Subsequently, seven young people took part in the research and completed the interview. There is no general consensus regarding the desired sample size for thematic analysis (Fugard and Potts, 2015) however, guidelines set out by Clarke and Braun (2013, p.50) have suggested that for “small projects”, six to 10 participants are recommended for interviews.

Ethical approval was discussed with all participants, and they were assured confidentiality, and advised that they would not be referred to by their name in the research and the write up. The semi-structured interviews explored the participant’s experience of the college and how their emotional needs are supported within the setting. The interviews took place at the college and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. The interviews were conducted between June 2024 and October 2024. The interviews were voice recorded on Microsoft Teams and transcriptions were automatically generated. Following the interviews I manually reviewed the content to ensure the transcriptions were an accurate reflection of the semi-structured interview.

A summary of the young people’s information participating in the research can be found in Table 2.

Table 2:
Young People's Information

Young Person	Age	Gender	Nationality/County of origin	Previous Experience of Education Outside the UK
1	17	Male	Sudan	Attended school in the evenings
2	Unrecorded	Male	Afghanistan	Attended school for nine years
3	18	Male	Sudan	Attended school since five years old, experienced shorter school days in Sudan
4	18	Male	South Sudan	Attended school at the UNICEF camp, following the breakout of the war in 2013/14
5	17	Male	Afghanistan	Attended school for seven years before leaving Afghanistan
6	18	Male	Afghanistan	Attended school for a few years but left to study in the UK because he was not feeling safe in the school
7	18	Male	Afghanistan	Attended school previously until 8th class

Familiarisation doodles were made for each young person in order to gain a deeper understanding of them, their hobbies, interests and perspectives. These can be seen for each young person in Appendix G.

For further context, the current situation in Afghanistan, Sudan and South Sudan will now be outlined. Afghanistan is noted as “one of the world’s most urgent crises” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025a, para. 1). The United States (US) withdrew their troops in 2021 from Afghanistan, the Taliban have since regained control and continue to carry out human rights violations. Human Rights Watch (2025) shared that girls and women in Afghanistan have been banned from accessing secondary education or attending university. Females must also wear the hijab and have a male guardian when travelling or face being detained and subjected to violence (Human Rights Watch, 2025). In a 2022 report from the United Nations Development Programme, it was found that almost all Afghans are experiencing poverty, and 90% experience food insecurity (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). In 2024 it was reported that over half of the population in Afghanistan required urgent humanitarian aid (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025b).

In Sudan, a civil war broke out in 2023, resulting in the largest displacement crisis of the year, the conflict has continued since then (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025c). 14 million people have had to leave their homes and as of September 2024, Sudan also has the largest number of displaced children (World Vision, 2025). Due to the conflict approximately, 90% of Sudan’s 19 million school aged children have no access to formal education (UNICEF, 2024).

Following the independence of South Sudan from Sudan in 2011, war and conflict broke out over the years in South Sudan (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). In 2014 the food crisis in South Sudan was labelled the “worst in the world” (BBC News, 2014, para 1) and famine was declared in 2017 (UNICEF, 2017). South Sudan is also greatly impacted by climate change, including extreme flooding and they encounter agricultural challenges in addition to the ongoing and increasing ethnic conflict (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

3.6 Procedure

The interviews started with a short discussion of the research and consent to be recorded was confirmed again. The interviews were around 30 minutes on average. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by a list of initial questions (Appendix B). There were some limitations around the young people’s proficiency in English, as I had been guided by the staff in ESOL, and there was an assumption made around what the young people would be able to understand given their language. Some young people did struggle to understand the term ‘wellbeing’ which I explained prior to the interviews and during the interviews. Subsequently, the term ‘emotional needs’ has been used to more accurately reflect the discussions held in the interviews. I also supported their understanding by providing the young people with a printout of the interview questions and I gave them time to

read through and ask any questions before beginning the recording. Further scaffolding involved the use of open-ended questions and follow up probes as there were no resources available to use a translator.

4.0 Analysis of data

The semi-structured interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen due to its alignment with my social constructionist epistemological stance, which acknowledges that meaning is co-constructed. This approach allowed for the exploration of UASC's experiences and how they have been shaped by external factors and contexts. While Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) informed the structure of the literature review and semi-structured interviews, it was not used as a theoretical framework within the analysis. This decision was taken in order for the analysis to be participant led and for the generation of themes to highlight the voices and views of the young people. Within Chapter 3, I will also provide further information on my developing thought processes, how the research evolved, and key influences on the research process and my thinking.

Thematic analysis was facilitated with both inductive and deductive theme generation (Braun and Clarke, 2021), allowing the research to be informed by existing literature on the experiences of UASC, whilst also capturing both semantic and latent meanings within the data. Ideas which were particularly influential were the impact and importance of relationships for UASC and also educational settings being supportive and inclusive. I attempted to maintain a level of objectiveness by listening to the transcripts multiple times over a period of a few weeks. Changing my immediate environment and listening at various times throughout the day supported me to notice details that I had previously missed or interpreted differently. Through exploring semantic and latent meanings of UASC's experiences, I was able to capture explicit experiences and also more conceptual and implicit meanings in the data. Reflexive thematic analysis also emphasises the importance of positionality and acknowledging my influence on the theme generation, as such it was vital to critically engage with the reflexivity in order to ensure a rigorous analytical process. This involved making reflexive notes following listening to each transcription which supported me to identify when my personal experiences were shaping my interpretations more (Appendix H).

The analytical process consisted of six steps (Braun and Clarke, 2021): familiarisation, generation of initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and the write up. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that these steps are not linear and encourage the revisiting of previous steps. Thus, I spent time revisiting the coding section during the generating of themes and also revisited the generation of themes

during the reviewing themes step. I kept a reflective diary throughout to note any feelings and thoughts that arose during the process, an example can be seen in Appendix H. One aspect of the data that did surprise me was the ambition that the young people had, they were motivated and wanted to succeed. They also appeared to be well informed about how to achieve their ambitions, this surprised me as it did not appear to be a major theme in the literature I had previously explored. Subsequently, I thought about potential gaps in literature and how research into UASC and refugees is often deficit focused, it also meant it was important to consider my preconceived ideas prior to beginning coding.

4.1 Familiarisation

During step one, time was spent transcribing and editing the transcripts to ensure they reflected the audio recordings verbatim, this involved listening to the audio recordings multiple times. The transcripts were generated via the Teams transcription function; however, the audio recordings required careful reviewing and were listened to numerous times as some of the young people's intonation and expression were unclear and not transcribed correctly by Teams. In order to become more familiar with the data, time was spent re-reading the transcripts and creating familiarisation doodles for each young person to immerse myself in the data in a creative way and to facilitate critical engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Couceiro, 2024) (Appendix G). Braun and Clarke (2021) recommended that these visual notes are for my own understanding of the data, when drawing them, it supported me in understanding more about each young person's narrative and connect with their views in a way that felt less overwhelming. This visual form of engagement enabled me to feel more familiar with the data and ready to begin the coding, I have reflected more on this within Chapter 3.

4.2 Generation of Initial Codes

During the following step, I generated initial codes, within this phase, segments of data were coded which were relevant to the research questions or captured something interesting. Data was unitised using a mixture of a few words, single sentences and paragraphs that encapsulated a single idea and concept. A sample of the coding carried out on Microsoft Word can be seen in Appendix I. Initial codes were made by using comments in Microsoft Word, this involved highlighting the text and adding a comment which would then present in the margin relating to the highlighted text. Coding was conducted using an inductive method, which involved being data-driven, however it is important to acknowledge that pure induction is not possible as I am also bringing my own perspectives and understanding of the previously carried out literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Braun and Clarke recommended considering both semantic and latent coding, they define latent

codes as capturing hidden meaning whilst semantic coding captures explicitly expressed ideas. First, simple semantic codes were made which explored the data for explicit codes, for example “in ESOL we are like like we are like family” was coded as ‘strong relationships with peers’. Then I searched for implicit meanings, generating latent codes which focused on both what and how the young people responded to the questions (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). An example of a latent code is “it’s important because there is a lots of different cultures. So we meet together and we can eat different foods so we know each other’s culture” was coded as ‘celebration and inclusion of cultures’. I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2021) general guidelines for codes and code labels which supported me to ensure my labels were not too broad, indicated meaning, and indicated my own interpretation. Initial codes were then discussed in research supervision with my research supervisor before beginning to generate themes.

During supervision we discussed some challenges I experienced during coding around the short responses the young people gave, however the data was still rich and full of relevant comments which linked to my research questions. As recommended by Braun and Clarke, I repeated this process twice, re-reading through the transcripts and adding in additional latent and semantic codes. The coding process stopped when it was felt that the codes “richly and thoroughly captures the analytically-relevant aspects of your dataset” (Braun et al., 2016, p. 10). This was discussed in supervision, where I presented my codes and explained how I felt that there was no further text which would be relevant to my research questions.

4.3 Generating Themes

Following the coding, time was spent generating a macro code following YouTube tutorials in order to transfer all the semantic and latent codes and the linked text over to an Excel document for each young person. Having the text and codes all in one Excel document made the process feel more structured. As each young person’s transcript had their own Excel sheet and each row had an assigned code, I began to look through identifying commonalities and started to group together similar ideas. The codes were then clustered physically on an Excel sheet to identify patterns, an example of this can be seen in Appendix J. Following this, it was easier to identify shared meaning and I began to name provisional themes. To support my thinking, I created an initial visual mapping of themes (Appendix K) which is a technique recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021). Within the visual mapping I noted that there were quite a few themes which were similar to those identified in previous literature including staff support, the importance of speaking the language of the receiving country and relationships with others.

4.4 Reviewing Themes

Theme and subtheme development and reviewing was supported through Braun and Clarke's (2022) questions, including what is the boundary of each theme, what is unique and specific to each theme and what the theme contributes to the overall analysis? The themes were reviewed in the following weeks through revisiting the transcripts, and through discussions during research supervision. This involved revisiting my clustered codes repeatedly and identifying why these themes belonged together, I also ensured my themes were not just summarising data and that they were distinct from each other and not overlapping. The journey from the initial mapping of themes to my final themes, along with reflection notes, can be seen in Appendix K. During this phase some examples of changes consisted of one theme being added which reflected the young people's aspirations. In addition, the subtheme of 'external support' was deleted, and the theme 'space' was turned into a subtheme.

4.5 Defining and Naming Themes

The themes were then named and defined which can be seen in the analytical narrative section below. While 'relationships' was generated as a subtheme under 'staff support', it was felt that there was overlap with the existing theme, 'relationship with others'. In order to maintain thematic clarity and avoid unnecessary repetition, I discussed the themes further during supervision and created clearer theme boundaries. These boundaries can be seen in the analysis section. The names and definitions of the themes were decided by following Braun and Clarke's (2021) guidelines of "a good theme name will be informative, concise, and catchy" (p. 111). This proved quite challenging and took multiple attempts, I finally settled on including a key quote from the young people to give a clear sense of what the theme covers.

4.6 The Write Up

The final step involved creating the report, which Braun and Clarke (2006) stated should be "concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell" (pg. 93). Following theme development, I revisited relevant literature and carried out further literature searches around ESOL spaces and ambitions. Some theories, for example Allen and Kern (2017) were relevant but did not fully reflect all of the data, as such it was important to remain cautious and sensitive when applying theory. I considered predominant theories which offered further insights into the data such as school belonging and ideas of school connectedness. It was important to remain reflexive when applying existing theories and consider what assumptions I was making.

5.0 Presentation of Themes with Analytical Narrative

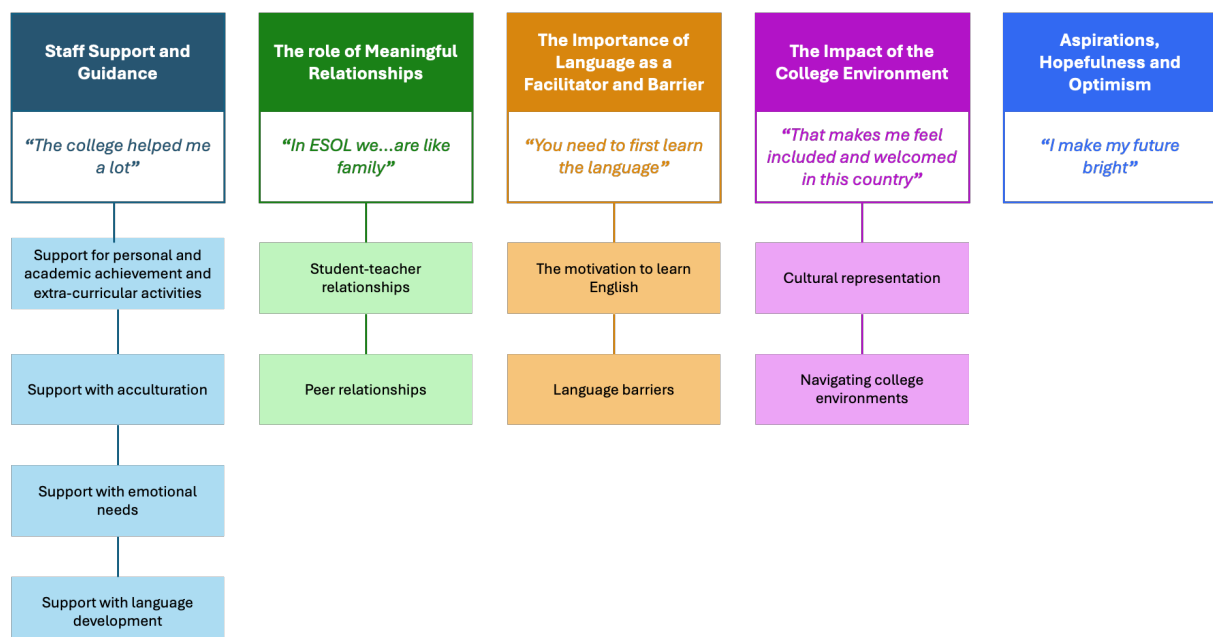
The themes I have developed from the current research will now be presented and structured. These themes were identified through the reflexive thematic analysis process as part of the Big Q qualitative research. Braun and Clarke (2021) recommended integrating findings and discussion to create more cohesion and less repetition, as such the write up is provided alongside the analytical narrative. The themes will be related to existing literature to provide a thorough understanding of each theme and further insight into their implications.

The current research reports five core themes and 10 subthemes as seen in Figure 3, these consist of:

1. **Staff Support and Guidance:** *The college helped me a lot*
2. **The Role of Meaningful Relationships:** *In ESOL we ...are like family*
3. **The Importance of Language as a Facilitator and Barrier:** *You need to first learn the language*
4. **The Impact of the College Environment:** *That makes me feel included and welcomed to this country*
5. **Aspirations, Hopefulness and Optimism:** *I make my future bright*

Figure 3:

Thematic Map



Each theme captures a distinct but interconnected feature of how each young person has navigated their life within this college. The themes will be reported in the following section.

Theme One: Staff Support and Guidance - *The college helped me a lot*

The theme of staff support was prominent across the data set, as the young people described how the support from staff had been important to their experiences of settling into the college. This theme encompasses a wide range of support that staff members have provided for the participants including, providing support for their academic progress, adapting to the culture within the UK, support for their emotional needs and developing their English language skills. This is consistent with previous research into school belonging and connectedness which highlights the important role of staff support (Allen & Kern, 2017, CDC, 2009, Smith & Culbert, 2024).

Subtheme: Support with Personal and Academic Achievement and Extra-curricular Achievements

The first subtheme contributed to the theme of staff support by identifying how staff provide support for UASC's personal and academic achievement and also extra-curricular interests and activities. This subtheme was generated due to the young people identifying how the college staff would go beyond delivering lessons and provide support through motivation, helping the young people with any difficulties, and being readily available.

Young person 1 discussed that the college staff were very supportive when he needed more information on the courses available, advice about interviews and help to prepare presentations:

Young Person 1: *just come to speak to them one of my teachers. So, she tried to help me and I want to start to advisership so that they can like I have to book an appointment an interview with them... So she helped me how to do my interview. So this is one of the good thing like, the teachers always try to help us.*

This is similar to findings from Smith and Culbert's (2024) review, which highlighted the importance of staff being available to listen to their students and the subsequent impact of this on school belonging. In addition to academic support, the young people identified that they felt supported by staff in a pastoral capacity or when they encounter any challenges or

problems, such as getting lost in the school environment or knowing what lessons are timetabled:

Young Person 4: *If I need help here. And the teacher near me I can try to say to ask him like to help me on whatever I want to do. Like, you know, if or sometime if I get like if I get lost, I don't know my class, I can ask a teacher.*

Young Person 2: *If I have any problems, I share with him [tutor], you are able to speak to them.*

Young Person 3: *If I've got a problem, I will talk to the college advisors. So they would advise me and I would do the right things.*

This highlights the impact and importance of staff support in general within the college. The young people were aware of the college staff being helpful and friendly and felt comfortable to go to them for support, reflecting research exploring the impact of relationships on connectedness and belonging (CDC, 2009). The consistent presence of teachers appears to help build trust and strong relationships which is particularly significant for young people who may have experienced traumatic events. This mirrors findings from earlier studies which stress the importance of staff creating welcoming environments for UASC and refugee students (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). Madziva and Thondhlana saw that by being welcoming and promoting inclusive practices, students' pastoral needs and academic success can be positively impacted.

One young person expressed how he felt the staff in the college were always available to support, Young Person 1 shared:

Young Person 1: *(Specific tutor) whenever you want help he'll be with you.*

Young Person 7: *They are really nice. They they are supporting us every time, every time. If we need support, they are available to talk to us.*

In addition, Young Person 6 highlighted how the staff support the young people in the college to learn but also to make friends and socialise with others:

Young Person 6: *they [staff] really support us to make friends, and they support us to, you know learn.*

These quotes show the significance of feeling supported both academically and in a pastoral capacity. Furthermore, previous research has shown that UASC can struggle to access mainstream education due to their lack of parental support (Fazel, 2015). Sentiments from Young Person 1 show that the college staff have a crucial role in the lives of UASC, in the absence of the emotional support, advice and advocacy of parents. The statements from the young people are conceptually similar to earlier findings from Stewart's (2011) research which show the importance of teachers supporting students in an academic and pastoral capacity, not just "merely teaching students" (p. 133). The current subtheme identifies the importance of students feeling supported in more than just their academic work, and to be able to know who to go to when they are unsure or uncertain. Stewart (2011) further emphasised the importance of UASC having a key member of staff in school as this is crucial in assisting the young person to settle in and adjust to their new school setting and environment.

Some young people also spoke about the motivating conversations that staff have with them:

Young Person 1: *they always tell us like, how to stay a positive person, how to be a motive person. They always give a give us a motivation, you know?*

Young Person 4: *Like sometimes they encourage me to do this in life and this, yeah and I always get a more hope of going ahead because sometime when your teachers advise you in to do something great in your future, you always feel happy with that.*

Young Person 6: *teacher help me and push me to, you know, learn and go up and make your future whatever you want.*

The statements show how staff are encouraging and instilling the young people with motivation. These powerful words show how important it is to feel motivated and to feel supported within their college and how this can transcend into the young people feeling positive, driven and confident. These findings are in line with Madziva and Thondhlana's research (2017) which showed how vital it is for staff to motivate refugee and UASC students in order to support their personal needs and inclusion in the school setting. This underlines the need for school and college staff to ensure they are creating learning environments which are friendly, motivating and welcoming. Young Person 4, added how the support from staff has helped them in feeling much more confident and instilled with motivation:

Young Person 4: *I've just gained a lot of confidence and more experience in this college because things I never knew before have learned more here in this college, that's what keep me more confident and go ahead in my life.*

The young people shared how they developed in confidence from the support at the college, and that they also enjoyed how the college staff took them to extra-curricular activities:

Young person 1: *He (tutor) sits in the middle of this (points to area). So whenever you come here, you just, you just say, "XX" you just find him. He ... also took people for the sport.*

Through conversations with college staff prior to the interviews, it was understood that sports groups such as cricket were particularly important to many of the Afghan males attending the college. Cricket is one of the most popular sports in Afghanistan which may support young people to feel a sense of familiarity and comfort. This young person shared his appreciation for this particular staff member noting that he is available whenever they need for any queries but also to take the young people to extra-curricular activities. This reinforces the importance of staff being available, supportive and involved beyond the taught curriculum (Hek, 2005).

Subtheme: Support with Acculturation

Building on this, the following subtheme explores staff support of acculturation which was generated due to the young people describing how the college staff have supported their adjustment to their new setting and also to the rules and culture in the UK. Acculturation is the process of an individual participating in their receiving country's culture whilst maintaining their own culture (Fazel et al., 2012).

Some young people focused on how the staff supported them to understand the rules inside the college environment:

Young Person 1: *they just want us to, to be a responsible person. Yeah. So always they say like do this one and if you do this one you will have this one and teach us how the rules is as well. So that's the good thing*

Young Person 4: *Yeah, they they told me a lot of thing about the rules and recreation and this whole. Yeah yeah. How ... goes into school and how to respect*

one another. A lot of stuff in the school within, like, ruling within a in the college, yeah. They informed me about that.

The young people appeared to benefit from learning about the rules within the college, previous research by Hamilton (2004) demonstrated how some children may be unfamiliar with certain rules and cultures within their new educational settings, such as punctuality. Such misunderstandings can lead to barriers to learning, thus emphasising the value of informing new arrivals about school expectations.

The young people also discussed how the college staff supported their understanding of cultural norms outside of the college too. In this example, Young Person 3 describes how he was given advice around dealing with difficult social situations where people may be rude:

Young Person 3: *telling us how should we deal with the stuff outside of college. Like how should you talk to people. How should you be respect to people if someone being disrespectful to you, how you should deal with it? All these things they used to teach us about it.*

This echoes previous research by Hek (2005) who identified how education is crucial in supporting UASC's integration within the UK, and that this subsequently contributes to a sense of belonging. In addition, Young Person 7 spoke about how the college supports people who are new arrivals in the UK by giving them space and talking to them:

Young Person 7: *The college, they're they're doing well about that every time we have we have some like some teachers... last year, I was I was seeing that she [a teacher] was speaking with with the guys and every time she was trying to listen to, to to the guys, to, to people who came to the UK new, and it was good, it was really nice.*

Young Person 7 discussed the importance of teachers holding space for new arrivals to the UK, which can be an unsettling time for many UASC (Farmbrough, 2014; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). This young person demonstrates the relevance of college staff having strong active listening skills and supporting UASC as they adjusted to life in the UK. These sentiments echo similar arguments made by Mohamed and Thomas (2017) who discovered that staff members who were culturally sensitive and showed understanding of the challenges encountered by UASC were able to support their acculturation journey. Culturally sensitive practice may include reflective practice, being

sensitive and curious, having adapted and translated resources and having cultural understanding of trauma (Yim et al., 2025). Furthermore, Geltman et al. (2005) emphasises the importance of staff being culturally sensitive and providing support for UASC to navigate their new environments. Getlman et al. highlights the subsequent impact supportive staff had on CYP's acculturation. This illustrates the necessity of providing training on culturally sensitive practices for staff working with UASC and refugee students in order to effectively support them when adjusting to their receiving country's culture.

Subtheme: Support for Emotional Needs

Another subtheme which fits under the staff support theme, is emotional needs. This subtheme refers to how the young people discussed how the college staff have been supporting their emotional needs. Many young people participating in this study have experienced traumatic events including forced displacement, war and loss of loved ones (Hjern et al., 1998; Thomas et al., 2004). Subsequently, they can experience more mental health challenges than the general population (Bronstein et al., 2013). Across the dataset, it was noted that young people generally felt supported by staff and that the college staff cared for their emotional needs:

Young Person 2: *sometime you can share our our problems and that make us comfortable and guide us, guide us if we have any problems like we ask them [staff].*

Young Person 4: *they also told us if we are not feeling well and of other thing that first before they have some people can also trying to advise you to what to do because if you are not feeling well that that some stuff they can also trying to advise you you know what to do, not to think about the things before.*

Young Person 5: *we have lots of good teacher and I spoke to him. If I have a problem. So I, I I will share it with them and then they will solve.*

These quotes suggest the staff are encouraging the young people to share their feelings and in turn they have a trusting relationship with staff, in response the staff are providing emotional reassurance and practical advice. These sentiments from the young people build upon findings from O'Higgins (2019) who indicated that if young people feel adequately supported and their accommodation needs are met, this can decrease the need for psychological interventions and improve academic attainment. Furthermore, Hek (2005) identified that a lack of appropriate support could be detrimental to the emotional needs of refugee young people. As such educators of UASC should strive to ensure that they support

their students' emotions which could be achieved through establishing trusting relationships (Fuller & Hayes, 2020), using trauma-informed approaches (Mohamed & Thomas, 2017) and offering pastoral support (Stewart, 2011). Additionally, the CDC (2009) highlighted that when young people feel cared for by staff and others in their educational setting, they can develop a sense of school connectedness.

Additionally, Young Person 3 shed light on how staff went beyond asking if the students were okay, they would also try to understand what had happened and try to sort it out:

Young Person 3: *Like if they see you, it's stressed or like looking nervous, they will be like are you alright? Are you OK? What happened to you? Have you? Are you having a good day? ... They will try to find out what's going on with you and fix it for you and make you feel happy.*

Young Person 3 alluded to the college staff being attuned to the pupils in their setting, and for the staff to be aware of changes to their typical behaviour and personality traits which may indicate changes in their emotional needs. By having the awareness and understanding of all their students, staff can ensure timely psychological interventions and support are implemented. This builds upon previous findings from Chase (2013) which shows the need for secure and stable relationships in order to promote positive emotions for UASC. In addition, findings from Smith and Culbert's (2024) review, highlight that when students feel their teachers have created an empathetic and respectful environment, they can develop a greater sense of school belonging.

Subtheme: Support with Language Development

The last subtheme under staff support was language development, which was generated due to the young people identifying the role of the college staff facilitating their English language development. Some young people shared that they felt supported by staff to develop their English language skills, whilst others highlighted that their teachers would encourage them to speak English with others, which supported them in developing their English communication skills:

Young Person 2: *It is speaking. They give us homework. They guide us like sites. You can learn online also.*

Young Person 6: *because they say you need to learn English. You have to talk about just speak English and this, this they they are right because of you know we*

we are living here and we need to, you know push our language English. 'Cause we really need in this country to, you know, learn English.

Young Person 6 shared how the college staff have shown the importance of learning the receiving country's language and how language development would also facilitate their integration into the UK. This sentiment builds upon findings from Korac (2003) who discovered that language proficiency had a profound impact on refugee young people's integration to their receiving country.

When asked if they felt their English language skills had developed, Young Person 3 commented on how helpful the college staff had been at making lessons fun:

Young Person 3: *Yeah. And the reason is because of the college...College helped me a lot actually... Yeah, especially for us. Yeah, the people who come to the UK with zero English. They should go to college... They help us with reading, with writing, with a Chrome, everything. Before I, when I when first I came to the college ... there was some classes, it was a quite boring, but like the teachers tried, tried the their best to do it to make it fun for us.*

Young Person 3 specified how the college supported his English development through various learning activities and with resources. By creating an engaging learning environment, making learning meaningful and for learning to have real world relevance would support students to access and engage with the curriculum. This builds upon previous findings demonstrating the impact accessing the curriculum can have on UASC's language acquisition (Morgan, 2018). Young Person 3's views towards the college creating a learning environment which is engaging and fun highlights the importance of research conducted by McBrien (2005), which shows that when UASC do not understand the classwork this can impact their behavioural presentations. In addition, the statements from the young people further reflect findings from Korac (2003) which show that language proficiency is central to refugees' integration to their receiving country.

Theme Two: The Role of Meaningful Relationships - In ESOL we ...are like family

This theme will explore positive relationships which was generated due to the young people describing their relationships with peers and members of staff at the college. Meaningful relationships reflect the emotionally secure attachments the young people have to their peers and teachers at the college. This theme is separated into two subthemes in order to capture the different relationships discussed in greater detail. The first subtheme is student-teacher relationships, and the second subtheme is peer relationships.

Subtheme: Student-teacher Relationships

Whilst the previous theme explored the support the staff are providing, the following section will explore how the support is received, perceived and the subsequent emotional impact. This section will explore the young people's perceptions of their relationships with the staff at the college. Some young people discussed their close relationships with the staff and how they felt about being taught by them. When talking about their pastoral tutor, one young person compared him to a family member:

Young Person 1: *the teacher here he's just like our father... He just everyone here like respect him*

This sentiment reflects the significant impact that strong student-teacher relationship has had on this young person. The use of "our" by Young Person 1 also suggests that other students may also feel this way about this tutor. The comparison to a father figure demonstrates how valued emotional support and stability are for young people who have endured traumatic experiences. The use of the term "father" is important as many UASC have often experienced separation from their parents or even loss of their main caregivers, subsequently their attachment to college staff is crucial (Horgan & Ni Raghallaigh, 2017). This emphasises the value of educational staff in UASC's lives as role model and safe attachments, Allen and Kern (2017) and CDC (2009) also discuss the importance of consistent and secure emotional bonds within the school as part of school belonging theory. Allen and Kern (2017) highlight that emotional attachment to others is a consistent theme used when discussing school belonging. The young people also spoke about respect for others, which is echoed in research exploring the importance of children and young people feeling respected by staff and peers in order to feel safe in their educational settings and subsequently develop a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Sobitan, 2022).

Other young people also added that they feel close, strong relationships with their teachers:

Young Person 2: *they're kind and friendly... and that's why the difference between Afghanistan and here, you can feel like your teacher, just like friend and you feel comfortable with the team.*

Young Person 6: *the teacher we have is very nice and you can be learned like friendly and the teacher are very good, all of them.*

Young Person 7: *[specific teacher] Yeah, she's my best friend, yeah.*

Young Person 2 highlighted the difference in teachers from his country of origin compared to teachers in the UK, showing that they are approachable and caring. From the quotes above, it is felt that the young people have positive experiences and relationships with the staff at the college, explaining how friendly and approachable they are and even comparing them to friends. Arnot and Pinson (2005) echo these sentiments by emphasising how positive and welcoming attitudes from staff can support the inclusion of UASC and help them to feel celebrated.

Young Person 4 spoke about the impact of support from others helping him to forget about his traumatic past:

Young Person 4: *the way they treat us here in the college... you will normally forget everything happened to you in the life 'cause they the way they teach you, they guide you and everything.*

These powerful words from Young Person 4, highlight that positive relationships with staff can have such a profound and positive impact on their life. This aligned with findings from Rodriguez and Dobler (2021) who demonstrates the value of strong relationships with adults from their host country and how this can promote resilience, in addition to fewer mental health difficulties. Further research also shows that positive relationships with staff can lead to a greater sense of security and school belonging, highlighting the importance that strong positive student-teacher relationships are impactful for UASC (Baak, 2016; Kaur & Szorenyi, 2020; Ridley et al., 2019; Smith & Culbert, 2024). It must be acknowledged that this role for some teachers and staff may be challenging as supporting UASC can require significant amounts of energy, time and motivation (Bailey, 2011; Morgan, 2018).

Subtheme: Peer relationships

In addition to the meaningful relationships that the young people have with the staff at the college, this subtheme refers to another set of meaningful relationships with their peers. This subtheme was constructed due to some young people identifying that they had formed strong relationships with others from the ESOL department in the college. Some young people described their experiences in ESOL as fostering a strong sense of community and highlighted the supportive close-knit environment that supported their experience of settling into their receiving country. Young Person 1 identified others in ESOL as being close like a family and Young Person 6 also shared how familiar he feels with his ESOL peers:

Young Person 1: *Like brothers and sisters. Yeah. Like we share everything. We talk together...in ESOL we ...are like family.*

Young Person 6: *It's really good and all of them is friendly and we help each other, and we love each other and it's really amazing*

These sentiments are connected to attachment theory, which explores the importance of strong emotional bonds from childhood (Bowlby, 1958). For UASC they do not have support from their birth families, and subsequently peer support will provide developmentally appropriate social and emotional support (Eriksson et al., 2019). For UASC it is possible that peer relationships with those who share similar language and culture are very important given their vulnerability and that they are adapting to living in a different country and society (Brotsky & Marx, 2001; Mels et al., 2008). Within Goodenow and Grady's (1993) definition of sense of belonging, the importance of peer relationships is highlighted as crucial in developing a sense of belonging, this is also echoed in the review on school connectedness by the CDC (2009). Young Person 1 and 6 alluded that their peer relationships function as a supportive community. This support is essential in supporting UASC's adjustment to their new lives not only in the college setting but also within the UK. Other young people also identified that they spend time with their peers from the ESOL department and that there are similarities and shared characteristics between them:

Young Person 3: *I see friends from like my country, who I can speak to them in my language. In my first language and like shares the conversation with them*

Young Person 4: *We we do communicate, we talk, we we can do a lot of things together like you know, yeah.*

These statements also reflect the sense of community and support that the young people feel from others who have come from similar backgrounds within the ESOL department. Young Person 1 identified how his peers are like an extended family and able to provide comfort to each other and develop their sense of belonging at a time which is challenging and requires adjusting to a new country. This reflects the importance of attachments, especially for those who have been separated from their main caregivers. For UASC, it is especially pertinent to have supportive networks around them as often they have experienced loss or separation from their main caregivers, and research has identified how crucial it is to having peer networks in place for support (Fuller and Hayes, 2020). In addition, further research also shared how having peers from similar backgrounds can

support the acculturation process (Mels et al., 2008). Young Person 3 spoke about language similarities between him and his peers which is echoed in research by Sobitan (2022) who found feelings of safety were related to having peers with shared experiences and also shared language.

The young people rarely spoke about having friends outside of the ESOL department, with one young person sharing how they did not need to go and talk to others from the wider college because he spends time with his friends instead:

Young Person 5: *I always with the in the break time in with the friends. So, I don't go to speak to the other one [peers outside of ESOL].*

Young Person 5 appeared to feel like he did not need to make friends with people from the rest of the college as he already has friends in ESOL. This may reflect social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), highlighting that people categorise themselves into social groups and develop a sense of identity and belonging from their membership to that group. Young Person 5, and other young people in ESOL may view the rest of the college as an outgroup, which would lead to them feeling less motivated to socialise outside of their social group. The sentiments shared by Young Person 5 also suggest the importance of the college encouraging communication with others in the college in order to develop their language skills and learn more about UK culture (Nasir, 2012).

Additionally, Young Person 1, also spoke in detail about how he had made friends through extra-curricular activities such as sport:

Young Person 1: *The favourite thing about my college is that there's sports day, yeah. Is it really good. It's it's a good day. Yeah. Like you go play football play basketball sometimes.... It's good. Like to have communicates with People like making friend.*

Young Person 1 and Young Person 7 also expressed how going on college trips also supported them to make friends and communicate with their peers:

Young Person 1: *And they take us out for, for for trips sometimes. Like for Easter trip. So, when you when you, when you go to trip like you can, you can meet people for other group like for example I'm in Group 11 so I can meet a guy from Group One for example. So, you can put it together and have them get to know him.*

Young Person 7: *I had a trip one week and I found a lot of friend there and I knew a lot of friend from there.*

The positive perception of extra-curricular activities is consistent with previous literature, further confirming the importance of arranging trips and clubs for UASC as it can develop their connections with others and support them to feel celebrated and included (Ritchie & Gaulter, 2020). All of these points may serve to reinforce feelings of belonging.

Theme Three: The Importance of Language as a Facilitator and Barrier - *You need to first learn the language*

The following theme will explore the importance of language and how it can act as a facilitator and a barrier. This theme was generated due to the young people describing their journey of learning English, speaking English with others and the impact this had on them. This theme is separated into two subthemes, learning the language and language barriers.

Subtheme: Learning the Language

This subtheme explored the young people's perceptions of learning English. It was generated because some young people spoke about their motivation to learn English and also emphasised the importance of knowing English:

Young Person 4: *For myself I can say like what I was interested in my life like, you know, when I was here, I don't. I wanted to learn English.*

Young Person 6: *they should need to study and they learn English and they are the language is very important to which which country you staying you need to first learn the language.*

Some young people discussed the importance of acquiring English as key to being able to adjust to life in the UK. The young people understood the necessity to speak English in order to navigate daily life within the UK and to speak English with others which can foster a sense of inclusion. Young Person 1 discussed the importance of learning English to communicate with others when he arrived in the UK:

Young Person 1: *But when I came here, like I was, I was a bit nervous, like to how can how can I learn this language but after after we communicate with people here I understand. Like it's not It's not hard to to learn as a language for other people.*

Young Person 1 discussed their reason for learning English was to be able to communicate with others, this provided the motivation needed to develop his skills. In research by Ager and Strang (2004) similar views were shared, highlighting that refugees viewed learning and speaking English as integral to making friends, improving a sense of belonging and helping with academic progress at school. Furthermore, research by Korac (2003) has shown the importance of language proficiency on refugees' integration process thus demonstrating why the young people may feel motivated to learn English.

Subtheme: Language Barriers

This subtheme was generated as the young people noted their feelings of awkwardness when speaking with native English speakers. Young Person 1 and 3 shared their feelings of embarrassment during interactions with others:

Young Person 1: *It's not as easy to get outside because as you know, like our language, our organisation. It's a bit different even if you stop someone and say, how are you doing? Yeah, they don't feel like you speaking to them like they're just thinking like you're saying something different, you know? Oh, yes. They say, what did you say? Could you say it again? Yeah. I feel myself like I'm just the embarrassing, you know, that's when.*

Young Person 3: *you know, when you when you like, come to people that you don't speak their their language. You don't feel like comfortable speaking to them because you will feel embarrassed that you don't know how to deal with them and how to speak with them*

Young Person 1 and 3 spoke about the challenges that arise when moving to a new country which speaks a different language. Young Person 1 shared sentiments of feeling different to others. They emphasised the fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood which may lead to feelings of isolation or have a significant impact on one's self-esteem. Young Person 4 discussed the complexities of speaking with others:

Young Person 4: *sometimes it is hard when you don't know the language and it's kinda hard when how to communicate to someone.*

Young Person 4 highlighted that it can be difficult to speak with others when first arriving in a new country and not speaking the main language. This echoes findings from

Farmbrough (2014) who observed how UASC can experience language barriers which can impact on their sense of social connectedness, thus leading to feelings of isolation or loneliness. Farmbrough's (2014) findings also reflect the feelings of embarrassment and loss of confidence that can be experienced when there is a limited understanding of the host country's language. The impact that the language barrier can have on UASC's emotional needs is evident, as such it is vital that schools are able to support the development of UASC's English language skills (Hek, 2005).

Within the current research, young people generally appeared to feel that their language had developed. Some young people did however mention barriers to accessing further learning courses due to their English language qualifications. Some young people shared that they feel like they need more support in order to progress further, whilst other young people felt that they needed more challenging work:

Young Person 1: *So the the only one thing like is stopping me to do this course is language.*

Young Person 1: *The other thing I need to add it in this college. I need like having the day for speaking you know like most of the student here they are speaking so bad ... Because we don't have.. we need like some like debate or like have conversation here like we need to talk about different topic every day and this will be helpful for all of us... I think this this would be good for all of us of us to improve our listening and speaking skills.*

Young Person 2: *they have to give us more lessons and take exams quickly because someone if someone interests and love English they they learn English quickly and someone slow so they have to change and there's all the same same stage, the same class, all semester. And I think it's just some student ... they should be in a higher group.*

These quotes may suggest that the teacher expectations may be lower than what the young people are capable of, it may also highlight the range of ability within groups, with some young people feeling that the work is too easy. This is contrary to the research I explored within the literature review, however it suggests the importance of school staff being aware of each individual's needs and the impact this has on them within the classroom (McBrien, 2005). Whilst Young Person 1 and 2 believed they needed more challenging work in order to develop further, Young Person 7 expressed concerns regarding accessing further courses due to lack of spaces and funding for the classes:

Young Person 7: *Because on open day, I came here and I talked to a career advisor in college in reception and they just told me you have to wait for next year because we don't have a space for this year. So they could, they could give me GCSE maths and English, Biology, that I need.*

Morrice et al., (2021) supports views shared by the young people, arguing that some refugee students and UASC were experiencing challenges in accessing further courses due to limited spaces and lack of resources. Morrice et al., (2021) emphasised the impact that limited levels of English language can have on students' relationships with peers, their ability to progress academically and on their self-confidence. This further supports the need to improve access and allocation of resources and to ensure that teachers of UASC are equipped to respond to the needs of their students (Block et al., 2014; Tikly, 2018). Furthermore, the young people's sentiments are echoed in findings from Gladwell and Chetwynd (2018), within their research they highlighted that there were not enough funded hours available for ESOL students and subsequently UASC were not able to make progress in line with their wishes.

Theme Four: The Impact of the College Environment - *That makes me feel included and welcomed to this country*

This section will explore the theme of college belonging which was generated due to the young people describing their experiences of the college environment and the impact that it had on them. The college environment within this theme refers to the young people's physical spaces used by the young people. This includes how these spaces have been adapted to be more inclusive and culturally representative. Within the review by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2009), they highlighted the impact that the school environment has on school belonging and connectedness as this can create positive perceptions of the school for the young people. This theme is separated into two subthemes which captures in further depth the different factors that add to the experiences of college belonging for the young people participating in this research.

Subtheme: Cultural Representation

This section will explore the subtheme of cultural representation. This subtheme was generated due to the young people speaking about the way that they felt represented and included in the college through different ways, such as the use of their first language on information bulletins throughout the ESOL area:

Young Person 1: *If even if for example for me I understand I understand everything like if the rules or something like that but for some some student they can't understand the rules, so when they see that it's it has been written in your language you can understand the rule and you say, yeah, OK, this I must I mustn't have to do this one.*

Young Person 3: *Sometimes they do put like advice in our language so we can understand so that that makes me feel included and welcomed to this country.*

Young Person 7: *Sometimes some some informations, new informations or some something I see some warnings ... I think it's important for someone who is new in here, it is really helpful for them. Like they don't know English.*

Through spending time in the college, I noticed some key messages which were presented in multiple different languages on a whiteboard in the centre of the ESOL department. Some young people appeared appreciative of the college staff using UASC's first language and recognised the importance of this for their peers who may not speak English as proficiently. This builds upon findings from Timm (2016) who highlighted the importance of policies in education settings that focus on the UASC's culture in addition to the receiving country's culture in order to support their sense of belonging. Furthermore, research in Lebanon (UNICEF, 2012) indicated the negative impact that language barriers can have on inclusion, demonstrating the importance of having key messages displayed in the UASC's first language. Some young people also talked about culture days which were organised once a year by the college and set up for the whole college to attend:

Young Person 1: *Even today is like culture day. They turn on our culture's music... so every culture they give them a special time, like 5 minutes for this person, 5 minutes for this person... so that's a good thing.*

Young Person 5: *Every year we do the culture. Then we bring the our traditional foods and we can celebrate together ... it's important because there is a lots of different cultures. So, we meet together, and we can eat different foods so we know each other's culture.*

The culture days were talked about by young people positively and as a time to celebrate their cultures. The importance of celebrating diversity is echoed in previous research (Pugh et al., 2012; Rutter, 2001) with an emphasis on whole-school approaches.

The culture day is an event which is advertised across the whole college for anyone to attend. Previous research has also indicated that socially inclusive practices can foster a sense of belonging (Block et al., 2014) and Arnot and Pinson (2005 and 2010) advocate for education settings which encourage inclusion and celebrate diversity, hence highlighting the possible positive impact of culture days and the need for more frequent similar events.

Some young people also spoke about the importance of religion and how important it was to have the time and place to pray:

Young Person 2: *We have a space here. If we have someone who want to pray they can use.*

Young Person 3: *Yeah, there is somewhere that I do my religious stuff here. Yeah, in the college and outside the college.*

I noticed in the ESOL department a room labelled the 'prayer room' which the young people could use when required. This highlights how staff are aware of the young people's religion, showing that they value and respect their cultural identities. Feeling respected and recognised is very important when settling into a new culture and can subsequently increase feelings of belonging (Sobitan, 2022).

Young Person 5: *They give us the space for the pray and there is nothing wrong. So if you if you're Muslim so like there is a space you can go with them mostly then you can pray ... My religion is on the top. And then studying.*

Young Person 5 highlighted that for him, his religion comes first before studying, as such it is vital that he is provided with space to pray and feels encouraged by staff to continue to practice his religion. These sentiments build upon Ni Raghallaigh and Gilligan's (2010) and Handlin's (1973) findings, highlighting the importance of UASC continuing to practice their religion, and how it can serve as a coping strategy when moving to a new country. The current findings also highlight the importance of inclusive practices and the impact this can have on an individuals' sense of belonging within their school environment (Handlin, 1973; Kohli, 2011). Furthermore, other research has highlighted that when UASC feel others respect and show interest in their culture and religion then this can contribute to their feelings of safety within the school environment (Sobitan, 2022).

Subtheme: Navigating College Environments

This subtheme was generated due to young people talking about how they felt about their school environments. In this particular college where the current research took place, the ESOL students had a separate section where they would have some of their lessons and spend breaks and lunchtime. This had been a recent change in the past two years, prior to this the ESOL students were in the same buildings as the rest of the college without a separate area to spend time outside of lessons. When asked about their college environment, Young Person 1 shared the difference between last year to now:

Young Person 1: *The positive thing also last year it was it wasn't like this one. that it was like outside the ESOL classes. So, we don't have like a special place to to stay together and have a communicate... yeah, it was different set as well. this year they changed it. When after they came here, I think he is a little bit like, a little more comfort.... So now we have places here we can see you can visit here and wait for your class yeah and you can talk with your friends with us you can use a computer over there.*

Young Person 1 referred to a number of benefits, having a special place to be together can foster a sense of community and identity. He also shared that this space is better than last year as he is able to socialise which can reinforce friendships. Last year the students had to wait for their lessons in busy corridors, now however it appears to be a less stressful environment and may indicate less difficulties encountered with other young people in the rest of the college. Furthermore, the young person referred to having access to a computer which may be beneficial for his learning and access to emails in order to contact staff.

Overall, Young Person 1 appeared happy with the changes made to the college. This can be linked to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), Young Person 1 described the ESOL area as a secure base, where his basic emotional needs for safety, comfort and connection are met. A secure base is also a key concept in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958) and school belonging theory (Allen & Kern, 2017; CDC, 2009), as having access to a safe space can subsequently promote feelings of emotional security and attachment, which is essential in developing a sense of school belonging.

Other young people also commented on enjoying the space that is available for just ESOL students and it being a place to find their peers:

Young Person 5: *yeah, there is a good space because in the break time so lots of people came here we we can speak together. So I think that's good.*

Young Person 6: *This is just for ESOL student, most of them. Yeah, the this is the office. I know most of them. They're class of ESOL.*

Young Person 7: *yeah, it's good. We have all our break there, over there, we call ESOL area... And this is really nice place to take a rest... I think I can find all of my classmates here.*

The young people appeared to enjoy having a designated space to spend time with their peers and also commented on it being easier to find their friends. Other young people felt differently about having a designated space:

Young Person 2: *I don't think about it, but, if you're studying, if you enjoying studying, you don't care about place or anything.*

Young Person 3: *In my opinion, I think it's not a good idea to like separate an ESOL student from other people... because we need to have a communication the people who has a language. But like if you just put us put all of us the same in one place, how can we speak English?*

Some young people expressed mixed feelings regarding the designated ESOL spaces, with one young person feeling like it hindered their integration and English language development. Young Person 3 shared that they were able to make friends with English people before, however now they are only speaking with people from similar backgrounds who often also speak the same language:

Young Person 3: *Because you know, if you get, if they just put us here, Afghan people they will be like in a groups talking to our language, ... So when I used to study at the other building that. It was easy for me to make a friend. Yeah, I was to be a friend with English people.*

Young Person 3 raises two issues within this quote, sharing the impact on his language development by being in a separate ESOL space which can impact their opportunities to speak English to native speakers. It also highlights how it is more difficult now to make English friends.

This divide in views is also reflected in the literature. Some research has indicated that having a designated ESOL space can provide a more focused learning environment and helps individuals to build their confidence in a safe setting without potentially racist

classroom practices (Norton, 2016). However, similarly to the views expressed by Young Person 3, there is research which reflects the view that having a designated ESOL space can impact UASC's social integration and also limit the interactions they have with other native peers thus, possibly impacting their second language development and ability to make friends outside of ESOL (Abla & Al-Masri, 2015).

Additionally, feelings of safety when navigating the school environment are of utmost importance, when referring to his previous experience of education Young Person 6 shared:

Young Person 6: *No, I know. I just. I went to in Afghanistan, I just for 3 class. I left because of the the situation are no good and we are just we are not feeling safe in the school. That's why we left the school... I suggest to come here to study this country.*

This suggests the importance of feeling safe in your school environment in order to be able to learn, thus reflecting Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943). Maslow highlighted the importance of meeting basic needs and physiological needs first before being able to focus on psychological needs and reach self-actualisation. Therefore, creating an educational environment in which all children and young people feel safe is crucial to support the development of belonging and connectedness.

Notably, none of the young people discussed encountering racism which is frequently highlighted in previous literature (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2022; Fozdar & Hartley, 2014; German, 2013). This could be due to the separated ESOL space within the college environment, which could create a more shielded area for the young people. Alternatively, it may be due to the young people's hesitancy to report such issues possibly due to concern it could impact their asylum claims, or it may even suggest desensitisation to frequent racism encountered. However, it could also be due to the interview questions being framed positively and not focusing on their potentially negative experiences. It could also reflect the college's practices and suggest that anti-racist practices are being promoted within the college.

Theme Five: Aspirations, Hopefulness and Optimism - *I make my future bright*

This section will explore the final theme that was constructed due to young people recognising the importance of education in helping them to settle and thrive in their new country of residence. This theme focused on UASC's aspirations, their ambitions, hopes for the future and also their motivation for learning. In addition, it could be suggested that the motivating conversations and comments made by staff as highlighted in Theme One, might be connected to the hope and optimistic outlook expressed by young people. The literature surrounding UASC frequently focuses on the trauma and hardships endured by UASC and

the impact of this on their mental health and emotional needs. Whilst this is highly significant, it is also crucial to understand and recognise that many UASC have developed high levels of resilience and subsequently have enhanced aspirations and optimistic outlooks for their future. The young people's aspirations and knowledge about further studies was evident across the dataset. Young Person 5 identified why college was important to him:

Young Person 5: *so in my opinion, it's important for me because I make my future bright. So if you wanna a good future, so keep it calm and learn.*

This powerful statement shows how education can serve as a beacon of hope and optimism for this young person and that education can empower him to achieve his aspirations. For Young Person 5, education feels hopeful and transformative which can foster a sense of self-confidence and agency. This juxtaposes the potentially traumatic experiences he may have faced previously as set out in the triple trauma paradigm (Michultka, 2009). This builds upon literature which has shown that many UASC have experienced trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), but despite this, UASC can develop resilience and resourcefulness (Papadopoulos, 2007). Furthermore, as echoed by Papadopoulos (2004, 2006) adversity may transform into positive developments which is labelled Adversity Activated Development and can result in individuals having stronger ambitions. This drive and determination can be seen in the following statements where two main routes were expressed by the young people. The first route is an entrepreneurial perspective with the young people striving to be their own boss:

Young Person 3: *But like next year, I want to study the GCSE... if I do business I want to like to get my own business. I know it's not easy, but like I'm going to go and work for some companies. Yeah. After I got the money that I can open my own business.*

Young Person 6: *because I really want to become a painter decoration (decorator)... become do my a good business if I can because of usually we working for someone but this is a chance I have a chance to do my own business.*

The second route is the young people expressing that they are trying to better themselves through education:

Young Person 4: *I wanted to continue my education here in this college until I reach the position of where I wanted to be... Yeah, I want to go up to university*

Young Person 7: *but I hope I can do this and I want to do aviation... And even even if I can't do this, I will try to do it in a private university or somewhere else.*

The young people were clear about their goals for the future and knew the paths and courses required to reach their ambitions. Some young people acknowledged that it would be hard but still seemed driven to succeed, which shows resilience. The young people appeared to understand the importance of education and how it can instil in them the necessary skills and knowledge. This sentiment is echoed in findings by numerous researchers who also saw that UASC had high aspirations for their future and were driven to achieve at school or college (Gateley, 2015; Hek, 2005; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Wilkinson, 2016). Furthermore, the young people expressed they have something they are working towards, which in turn is leading to feelings of hopefulness for the future and having an optimistic mindset which is good for emotional wellbeing. This is reflected in findings by Chase (2013), who noted that in order to develop emotional wellbeing, it is important to have a sense of security for the future, with education supporting UASC's ability to have aspirations and a sense of hope.

6.0 Conclusions

The current research aligns with the existing literature which has previously acknowledged that peer and teacher relationships, supportive and welcoming environments and inclusive practices have positive impacts on the educational experiences of UASC (Groark et al., 2011; Hek, 2005; Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017; Sobitan, 2022; Stewart, 2011). The research has given UASC a voice to share their views and what they find to be effective support, thus providing space for a marginalised group whose perspectives are often underrepresented. The research has helped to build further understanding of the support that UASC have viewed as valuable in their college setting and also shared ways that they hope to be supported further. This research, along with the existing research, including the perspectives of staff, family or social workers of UASC, helps to build a more detailed and holistic understanding of the experiences of UASC in an educational setting (Bailey, 2011; Morgan, 2018; Ward, 2022).

The current research provides novel contributions by highlighting how ESOL staff and peers can act as a form of family for UASC which is especially important in the absence of their own parents, carers and siblings. Furthermore, the college setting was unique and had a physically separate ESOL department. Whilst some young people enjoyed accessing this area, others felt that it acted as a barrier to wider integration. Subsequently, this research has highlighted the importance of activities and celebrations such as culture days and trips

to support the young people's sense of inclusion and connection. In addition, the research highlighted the mixed perspectives on the level of work in classes, some young people felt they needed an increased level of academic challenge in order to grow and learn more. Other young people also referred to feeling limited to access further learning and career opportunities. These novel contributions offer practical implications for how schools and college settings can better support the emotional and educational needs of UASC through relationship building, activities which support inclusion and learning which is tailored to each young person.

This study did not set out to explore belonging, however through asking the young people what they believe is important to their school experiences, the themes and subthemes align with school belonging theory and feelings of connectedness, particularly features identified within the CDC study (2009). This also provides an explanation for the potential impact on emotional and educational needs which, for UASC, appear to be closely linked. The following section will link the generated themes back to each of the initial research questions.

1. What factors do UASC find important to support their emotional and educational needs in a UK college setting?

The young people who took part in this research identified several factors which they considered to support them, and these may impact their emotional and educational needs within their college.

Themes One and Two reflect the importance of staff support and meaningful relationships. These themes appear to be interconnected highlighting how the supportive actions of the staff may have contributed to the young people's ability to form positive relationships with their teachers and peers. Peer relationships appeared to contribute to the positive experiences of the young people and may foster their sense of college belonging. Of particular importance was having time and space to socialise with peers. Having friendly staff was also significant for the young people as positive interactions with key members of staff were felt to be impactful and supportive of improved emotions and a greater sense of belonging and connectedness. This is consistent with previous research exploring the positive impact of peer and teacher relationships (Allen & Kern, 2017; CDC, 2009; Smith & Culbert, 2024). It was also important for staff to be welcoming and for support to not only be for the young people's academic progress but also for their acculturation to the UK by providing them with information about rules and how to treat others, which is in line with findings from Fazel et al. (2012). Furthermore, the young people discussed the accessibility and responsiveness of staff and highlighted how it was important that staff were available to

talk to whenever they had concerns, aligning with findings from Hek (2005) and Smith and Culbert's (2024) review.

The young people further highlighted the importance of language in shaping their college experiences. Language was both a facilitator and barrier to connection and participation, reflecting the complex dynamic also referenced in previous research (Morgan, 2018). By developing their English language, the young people shared that they would be able to communicate with others and access further studies. These ideas reflect the connection of language and belonging (Ager & Strang, 2004) and Morrice et al., (2021) also reflected the importance of language facilitating academic success and social connection. The young people also discussed how limited ability to speak English could lead to social exclusion and feelings of embarrassment when talking with others. Previous research reflected similar sentiments, highlighting how having limited knowledge of the receiving country's language can lead to barriers such as feeling isolated and less connected with others (Hek, 2005; Hek & Sales, 2002; McBrien, 2005; Michultka, 2009; Unicef, 2012). Research has also reflected how the young people from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds understand the importance of learning the receiving country's language in order to be able to integrate and settle into the UK and the subsequent impact this has on friendships (Farmbrough, 2014).

Another theme consisted of the college environment, specifically the young people's views regarding their separate ESOL space within the college. Their perspectives were mixed, with some young people enjoying having a space to find their friends and spend breaktime, whilst others shared that they felt separated from the rest of the college, and it hindered their ability to communicate with native speakers. Similarly, this notion is reflected in previous literature with some researchers suggesting that separate spaces can lead to feelings of segregation (Golden et al., 2014), whilst others feel that it can create a secure environment for young people to not feel judged when speaking (Sidaway, 2023).

One further key theme from the research indicated how the young people had a strong sense of hope and optimism for their future. The young people presented as ambitious and knew how to achieve their goals. Whilst much of the literature on UASC focuses on their vulnerabilities, poor mental health and experiences of trauma, some research also explores and highlights the importance of having a sense of hope and aspirations for the future in order to develop emotional wellbeing (Chase, 2013). Research also highlighted the drive and motivation to succeed despite their potential hardships previously experienced (Gateley, 2015; Wilkinson, 2016).

The young people also discussed the importance of being challenged with classwork in order to develop and continue to work towards their future goals and ambitions, whilst the previous research explored did not identify this, those from refugee and UASC backgrounds

did understand the importance of education and were ambitious (Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Ott & O'Higgins, 2019). The young people further shared that learning, which is engaging and made to be fun, supports them to remain interested in the lessons and subsequently attend their classes, which is echoed in findings that highlight when learning is too difficult this can negatively impact learners (McBrien, 2005).

2. What psychological theory explains how these factors may influence the emotional needs and education of UASC in a UK college setting?

The key themes suggested a link to a sense of college belonging and feelings of connectedness, aligning with features identified within research conducted by the CDC (2009). Similarly, the current research highlights the impact of different systems and interactions influencing the young people's sense of belonging, such as peer and student-teacher relationships, the college environment and hope and optimism for the future. Staff support was seen to be highly important to the young people in the current research, similarly Allen et al. (2018) saw that staff support was one of the strongest predictors of school belonging. Furthermore, the young people discussed the accessibility and responsiveness of staff and highlighted how it was beneficial that staff were available to talk to whenever they had concerns or queries. These sentiments are consistent with previous literature highlighting the positive impact of effective staff support on children and young people (Christie & Sidhu, 2002; Pugh et al., 2012; O'Higgins, 2019; Ward, 2022) and how subsequently this may impact their sense of belonging.

The sense of belonging to the college environment can be understood further through the concept of attachment within the school microsystem. Attachment theories (Ainsworth, 1985; Bowlby, 1958) highlights the importance of secure relationships and the subsequent impact on emotional development. Attachment to staff in school settings may create feelings of emotional safety, security and consistency due to the positive feedback, encouragement and guidance given by staff (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Similarly, attachment to peers may facilitate emotional support from others through shared experiences and help to foster a sense of inclusion and identity (Allen & Kern, 2017). Additionally, attachment to the school environment including the ESOL space may create feelings of a secure base and support feelings of group identity and connectedness (CDC, 2009). Finally, attachment to the curriculum and an understanding of why learning English is important may increase motivation to learn, attendance to college and feelings of hope for the future (CDC, 2009). All of these factors help to create a sense of optimism and a positive outlook for UASC. While many UASC may have previous experiences of trauma, lack of family support, encounter language barriers, and have anxiety around their asylum status,

educational settings can support the resilience of these young people through fostering strong attachments which can support both the educational and emotional needs of UASC.

The current research suggests that educational settings supporting UASC are able to provide support for the educational and emotional experiences by implementing several key practices. The young people have expressed the importance of positive, strong relationships, attachment with staff and peers, the importance of the college environment and feeling valued and culturally represented which is consistent with the concept of school belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017; CDC, 2009; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Smith & Culbert, 2024). These practices consist of multiple interacting systems including supportive and welcoming staff, language development, support to form and sustain friendships and a safe space to communicate with others. Furthermore, promoting inclusive practices such as having space to accommodate religious practices, ensuring visibility of UASC's first language and organising cultural events, such as culture days, can help to provide UASC with an increased sense of college belonging and connectedness.

6.1 Implications for Educational Psychology Practice

This research offers an exploration into the experiences of UASC in a UK college setting and contributes to the expanding body of research which explores the experiences of UASC. The current research focused specifically on the experiences of UASC within one college, in one local authority within the UK. This section will include implications for educational psychology practice.

One implication from the research relating to educational psychologists (EPs) is to develop further understanding of the challenges faced by UASC, including language barriers, acculturation, previous traumatic experiences and forming new peer relationships (Michultka, 2009). By developing a deeper understanding into the needs of UASC, EPs can adapt approaches and interventions to ensure they are culturally relevant and tailored to support UASC's emotional needs as many therapies are westernised and not fitting (Nasir, 2012). The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) standards of conduct, performance and ethics (2024) and the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2022) highlight the importance of treating others with respect and dignity and supporting them to make informed decisions where appropriate, which reinforces culturally responsive practice. Additionally, EPs could provide training to school and college settings to help support culturally responsive practices, anti-racist practices and trauma-informed approaches. This would seek to facilitate the implementation of whole-school, welcoming approaches to create a supportive environment for all children and young people. Furthermore, EPs can support schools to create more inclusive environments, ensuring UASC have access to religious spaces and visibility of their first language and celebrations of their cultures.

In addition, UASC are classed as children in care, and subsequently will have a personal education plan, some specialist EPs work with children in care within the Virtual School. This research may be helpful to the EPs working with children in care in highlighting the particular needs of UASC and effective ways of supporting them. Findings from an educational psychology working group (DfEE, 2000) shared that EPs are well positioned to include CYP's voice in plans in an impartial manner. Pupil voice can also be used as a tool for whole school development and professional practice in order to better meet CYP's needs. Research has highlighted that it is important to know what young people find helpful as this is more likely to be sensitive to individual's needs and support inclusion (Jelly, et al., 2000). This is especially important with marginalised groups who may not have a strong voice or feel confident enough to advocate for themselves.

In line with a systemic approach, as outlined in the BPSEM (Allen & Kern, 2017), EPs can hold an important role in supporting those working with UASC populations. This research has highlighted the significant influence that staff relationships and support can have on the educational experiences of UASC, including being considered as having a guardian figure and facilitating a sense of belonging (Ward, 2022). The amount of support provided may have an impact on staff wellbeing, their capacity and ability to effectively support all UASC in their setting. Supervision is a core element of an EP's role (Delaney, 2025) and subsequently EPs could create a space for staff to explore their emotions and experiences. This in turn may improve educational staff's capacity to provide effective, impactful support to UASC.

6.2 Practical Tools to Support UASC's Educational Experiences

The practical tools presented in Table 3 are informed by existing literature in addition to key findings from the current research. These tools also reflect UASC's views and what they consider to be helpful to support their emotional and educational needs within their college setting. These can be seen in the table below:

Table 3:

Practical tools to support UASC's educational experiences

Areas to Support	Possible Ideas to Support
Staff-student relationships	• Development of adult relationships through regular mentoring • Staff to carry out daily check-ins with young people

	• Staff being friendly, welcoming and approachable (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017) • Staff showing compassion and spending time exploring each UASC's strengths and interests (Stewart, 2011)
Friendships	• A space to find and spend time with peers from similar backgrounds (Lander, 2016; Saleh, 2021) • Opportunities to socialise with the wider school/college setting and the facilitation of peer connection and inclusion for example through: ○ Lunchtime or after-school clubs ○ Trips ○ Team-building activities ○ Social skills workshops and interventions ○ Collaborative group projects ○ Culture days • Peer mentoring and buddy systems
Staff awareness and knowledge	• Development of staff understanding regarding attachment theory • Regular and structured supervision for staff working closely with UASC and refugee CYP • Further training on UASC's needs for trainee teachers during PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) courses (Bourgonje, 2010) • Training delivered by EPs to schools providing information on culturally

	responsive and anti-racist practices (Gay, 2018; Hek, 2005) • Creating a trauma-informed classroom which includes (McIntyre & Abrams, 2020): ○ Having an understanding of each individual's needs ○ Consistency and structure ○ Recognition of fight, flight or freeze responses
Classroom and education environment	• Use of audit checklists to ensure culturally responsive practice and inclusivity • Designated areas to socialise and computers to complete schoolwork and access emails • Designated religious spaces
Education and learning	• Tailoring learning to UASC to support with academic progression • Practical learning activities to support language development • Linking educational support with Preparing for Adulthood (PfA) programmes to support employability

6.3 Strengths and Limitations of the Research

Within the following section, the strengths and limitations of my research will be outlined drawing upon the reflexive thematic analysis reporting guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2024), and Yardley's (2000) principles of quality within qualitative research. Yardley (2000) posits that sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, impact and importance are all characteristics of good qualitative research.

Yardley (2000) defines sensitivity to context as having a thorough understanding of the context and the impact of the researcher on the participants. Within this research I

maintained sensitivity to context by conducting a thorough literature review to gain an understanding of the current literature and also a conceptual understanding of the theory. This involved reading around the social, political and legislative context and good practice guidance. I also spent time carefully producing the ethics application, particular consideration was given to the impact the research would have on the young people taking part. Subsequently, this research only focused on aspects of support and experiences in the college, rather than asking questions about their past and previous potentially traumatic experiences. This was to avoid creating any discomfort for the young people and to avoid causing unnecessary distress for them. This, however, may lead the young people to downplay negative aspects of their lives, such as discrimination and racism, and to only focus on positive experiences which could offer a more limited perspective. Sensitivity to context was also shown by carrying out visits to the college, speaking to staff and observing the young people within the ESOL area which further supported my understanding of the setting. In addition, I kept a reflective diary throughout the process, carried out repeated listening to transcripts and created familiarisation doodles. It was also important to use my understanding of the context to aid my interpretation and actively think of alternative viewpoints when analysing the data. I also carried out further reading and literature searches in order to clarify any issues arising and further discussed these within supervision.

Commitment and rigour are defined by Yardley (2000) as engaging with the topic, having a thorough data collection and analysis. Within my research I promoted commitment and rigour through conducting a semi-systematic literature review and ensuring I explored literature, legislation and articles which were current. Within the data gathering phase, I carried out repeated visits in order to meet with a range of young people. I made numerous calls and emails in order to gain social workers permission and sent multiple emails to the young people in order to arrange the interview. I ensured rigour by following the reflexive thematic analysis steps diligently, as set out by Braun and Clarke in their practical guide (2021).

The reporting guidelines on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024) have supported me to explore how the analysis has been carried out with integrity at each step. This has included providing context and rationale within the literature review and introduction, clarifying my social constructionist approach and the consistency between the language and concepts used within the methodology section and reflexive thematic analysis principles. I have also detailed the process to gain ethical approval, discussed characteristics of the young people taking part in the research, explained why I used semi-structured interviews and how I developed my questions. Within the data analysis I provided a detailed account of each step and examples to evidence coding, reflections and theme generation and development. When writing the narrative, I also ensured I integrated existing

theory when reporting the themes and provided a balance of extracts and analytic narrative. In line with Braun and Clarke's guidelines for evaluating the research, I have ensured they are relevant to Big Q methodology and not quantitative or positivist norms.

Yardley (2000) defined transparency and coherence as being open about the research process and showing how the theory and method fit together. This was ensured by providing a detailed step by step account of the reflexive thematic analysis method and giving examples within the report. Transparency was also promoted by keeping a reflective diary entry, providing an example within the appendix and also through sharing reflections within the reflective chapter. This involved being honest and openly acknowledging dilemmas and issues which impacted on the data gathering and analysis, including difficulties with recruitment and gaining social worker consent. I also ensured I was reviewing the theme boundaries and definitions in relation to the data and discussing these within supervision in order to gain an alternative view and to question my own possible assumptions. It was vital to sensitively link the themes back to existing theory and research and to provide a coherent theoretical underpinning and integrate research.

Impact and importance are defined by Yardley (2000) as considering the research insights offered and contributions to policy or the community. Within the current research I have provided an account of the importance of this research to the educational psychology profession and how it might potentially influence practice. I have also shared wider implications to practice and provided guidelines on how education settings may further support UASC.

A limitation of the research could be the small sample size of seven young people. However, in accordance with the core principles of reflexive thematic analysis, I do not assume generalisability, and a small sample is not considered a limitation of qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2024; Yardley, 2000). Furthermore, the findings from the current research align with existing research in similar contexts. This indicates there may be potential validity to the results and indicates that there may be inter-subjective agreement underpinning my findings.

Language differences posed another limitation as there was some clarification needed in order to check that the young people's views were being accurately captured which may have impacted their responses and subsequently impacted the richness and validity. Due to the scope of the current research, it was not possible to secure a translator. Subsequently, I only included young people who had higher levels of English language skills as per the exclusion criteria which meant that the views of other UASC who were not as proficient in spoken English were not included within this research. This can restrict broader relevance and exclude other's views, resulting in possible elite bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

To support the young people during the semi-structured interviews a list of questions were printed and given to them prior to starting the interview. This was to support the young people's understanding and help them to feel more comfortable, however it may have influenced and shaped their responses. This was mitigated through the use of open-ended questions and follow up questioning, however at times the young people needed prompts due to limited understanding of some questions, as such some suggestions were provided.

The young people who took part in this research were all male and from three countries, Afghanistan, Sudan and South Sudan. It was intended to gather the perspectives of young people from different genders, cultures and nationalities, however, I was limited by time and resource constraints. This was further impacted by the low number of available young people who met the inclusion criteria. This research does not however aim for representativeness and generalisability and instead focuses on exploring people's experiences and stories in rich detail (Silverman, 2021). In addition, there was potentially a power imbalance due to the vulnerable positioning of the young people due to their legal status. Despite ensuring anonymity, this may have impacted the authenticity of their responses and there may also be social desirability in their responses.

In future research, it would be important to also consider alternative methods to gather the views of more young people who may find communicating in English a barrier to participating in research. The use of modern technology could be considered to support the gathering of more UASC's views, such as virtual focus groups and online surveys which have been translated in order to make the research more accessible.

There is also an absence of female voices within this research, which reflects gender based familial migration (Schiele, 2024) and ongoing barriers to education for girls and young women in countries such as Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Future research should seek to explore the perspectives of girls and young women who have made the journey to the UK in order to better understand the unique challenges they may encounter such as gender-based discriminatory attitudes and violence, in addition to their perspectives on the support they need.

The research has indicated that positive peer and staff relationships, celebration and inclusion of the UASC's culture, support to develop their English language skills and being in a supportive environment have contributed to positive experiences of education for the young people. The findings have also built upon the small but growing body of research which focuses on the strengths of UASC, identifying how despite their previous potentially traumatic experiences, the UASC expressed hope, passion and aspirations for the future. It will remain important to continue to understand the experiences of UASC from their perspectives, but to also involve their siblings, social workers or personal advisors and teachers in order to gain a wider, more holistic perspective.

Chapter 3: Reflective Account

1.0 Introduction

This chapter seeks to explore my research journey, including the limitations, challenges encountered and implications of the analysis. When I began to consider potential research topics, I created a wide range of ideas relating to race, immigration and culture in the United Kingdom (UK), however I found it difficult to be more specific. There were many topics which I was interested in and passionate about and refining my ideas into specific research topics and questions proved very challenging. Maintaining a strong personal interest in my research topic was something which was of utmost importance to me as I knew that this would instil in me the drive and motivation needed throughout the research journey. I began meeting with my supervisor to discuss potential research topics and we explored connections to a local college with a large number of children and young people (CYP) from an asylum seeking background. Following our initial discussions, I began to research further into this topic and started to keep a reflective diary, documenting key feelings and decisions made.

Remaining reflective throughout the process was vital in order to further support my journey to becoming a reflective trainee educational psychologist, as set out in The British Psychological Society Practice Guidelines (2017) and the Health and Care Professions Council standards of conduct, performance and ethics (HCPC, 2024). The following sections will outline my research journey and the challenges I encountered along the way.

1.1 Engagement with the research

As someone of dual heritage, I was raised with a mixture of cultural influences; my father emigrated from India at a young age, and my maternal grandparents relocated from Spain in their late twenties. Growing up, I often experienced a sense of disconnection and confusion about where I belonged and how to fit in with other children. These experiences of social separation from others and confusion of identity meant that, when I learned more about the potential research at the local college with unaccompanied asylum seeking CYP, I was immediately interested to explore this further.

Whilst I learned more about the potential to conduct research with this population, it felt deeply relevant and personally meaningful. The subject appeared to be familiar and extremely topical due to politics, the media and news coverage. The terms 'asylum-seeker' and 'refugees' are words heard frequently in the news. There is often an emphasis on the impact of small boats on the UK economy and the illegal traffickers, rather than the people seeking asylum (Pugh, 2004). This further motivated me to explore their experiences with care and sensitivity.

I vividly recall the United States troops withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the tragic scenes that unfolded following the Taliban's rise to power once again. The news of families desperately trying to flee in order to escape the Taliban had a lasting emotional impact on me. The following year I was working as an assistant educational psychologist (AEP) during Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. I observed the public's response to the war and how services, communities and schools united to receive and welcome Ukrainian refugees. This openness and care was remarkable to observe and highlighted the compassion of the UK and the other countries receiving large numbers of Ukrainians. However, unfortunately this also highlighted the inconsistencies in the treatment of Ukrainians compared to other "non-Western, non-European, non-Christian victims of war" (el-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024, p. 1). Having witnessed the stark differences in public and media responses, I felt more motivated to explore the lives of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) and young people further. I hoped that through exploring their perspectives of the college, the research could support professionals, including educational psychologists (EPs), working with UASC populations and support cultural awareness to inform practice.

Prior to becoming an AEP, I spent time working as a secondary school teacher, which shed light on the importance of pupil voice and reinforced the significance of being person-centred. Whilst I have had limited experience working with individuals from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds, I have worked with a range of CYP from diverse cultural and linguistic families. I spent time teaching children in care, which included CYP who frequently required a high level of support and care. Furthermore, this allowed me to see how attachment theory could be applied in practice, with research showing the positive impact on children in care's wellbeing and staff's understanding when attachment awareness programmes were delivered (Fancourt, 2019). This is important when considering UASC are designated children in care status upon arrival to the UK (Wade et al., 2012). Understanding this connection supported my thinking around the complex experiences that UASC may encounter. My time as a teacher further highlighted the importance of understanding each child and young person's individual needs, which was specifically important when considering the experiences of UASC. It remained important to recognise and hold in mind throughout the research that they are a heterogenous group and that their experiences will be different pre-migration, during migration and post-migration.

2.0 Refining the Research Focus

For the rest of the summer prior to beginning my literature review, I spent time searching and reading doctoral theses and research papers on UASC and refugees. I made notes about the research that existed reflecting on areas and concepts that I would like to

include in my study. I recall feeling overwhelmed regarding the amount of research into refugees following my first google search, however following further searches, I realised that in comparison to other topics this was actually a small but growing body of research. One paper that interested me was Morgan (2018), which explored the educational needs of UASC in one local authority. I particularly liked how this research had gathered professional and child perspectives. I realised how important it was to be child-centred and incorporate the voice of CYP within my research. This principle is strongly reflected in key guidance and legislation including The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) which highlights the importance of children expressing their opinions on experiences that impact them. In addition, The Children and Families Act (2014) emphasises the need to involve children and young people in decision making about their care and support.

In the Autumn term, my supervisor and I organised a meeting with the college to explore potential avenues for the research. We spent time meeting with the pastoral lead, discussing the context of the college and finding out more information about the young people attending. I also thought it was important to explore what would be useful for the college to ensure that the research was meaningful, especially for the young people who may take part. This was important as Boyle and Kelly (2016) highlight that research should be contextually relevant. The pastoral lead was keen to gather the views of the young people about the provision, explaining that there had been some recent changes made to the college, including a designated area being made available for the students who are English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Within the ESOL section of the college, the pastoral lead had an open plan office in the centre, there was a prayer room, sofas, tables and chairs, computers and classrooms towards the back of the space. Prior to this, the ESOL students would spend their breaks and wait for lessons in a busy corridor at the front of the college, adjacent to the main building which used to accommodate the business and enterprise department. The pastoral lead shared that it would be meaningful to explore the young people's perspectives regarding the changes to the space in the college. It was decided that the research would be inductive, and ideas would be developed from the young people's views, rather than theory driven. This would be more child-centred and reduce cultural assumptions about what the young people may find supportive.

Originally, I considered carrying out semi-structured interviews followed by 'Drawing the Ideal School technique' (Williams & Hanke, 2007) which is based upon Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955). This involves capturing the young people's views about their current education setting and ways they could make their college more like their ideal college. Following discussions with my supervisor it was decided that using multiple data collection approaches could overcomplicate the research, however on reflection this may have been helpful in supporting the young people to express their views further.

I decided to use semi-structured interviews as it would allow me to collect rich, meaningful data, while still allowing for the young people's perspectives to be heard. As such it was decided to explore the experiences of UASC in the college and the factors that contribute to their wellbeing. It was felt that this would be impactful and relevant to the college but also to the educational psychology profession in supporting EPs understanding and work with UASC. The British Psychological Society (BPS) published guidelines for psychologists working with refugees and populations who are seeking asylum within the UK (2018), stating the importance of psychologists working at a whole school level and supporting educational settings in welcoming UASC and refugee children and young people (CYP).

2.1 Exploring the literature

Having decided on the focus of my research, I began to carry out my literature review. I found this particularly challenging as previously I had not conducted a literature review to this level of detail. I chose a semi-systematic literature review as it offered a balance of exploring themes which were not in predefined categories, whilst also combining depth and breadth. Ward et al. (2009) noted that semi-systematic reviews are also useful as they support the researcher in finding themes in the literature and relevant theoretical models. The use of a semi-systematic literature review was also beneficial as it allowed me to include relevant literature which had not been published in an academic journal such as doctoral theses and media sources (Davidson, 2017). I also considered a narrative literature review however, I reflected that a semi-systematic review would provide more structure and rigour (Snyder, 2019).

When exploring the literature, it was evident that there was a small but growing body of research where UASC's voice had been included. Frequently, literature gained educational professionals or social worker's perspectives but did not include the perspectives of the young people. This reinforced the importance of exploring CYP's views in order to remain person-centred and understand their experiences further.

Whilst exploring the literature it was evident that language and terminology was very important. I was conscious of the language used to define UASC and refugee CYP. Articles and websites including, United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), The United Nations Refugee Agency, Amnesty International and Refugee Action supported my thinking around this. I began to question the use of 'asylum seeker' and understood how it could be viewed as dehumanising. At first, I was surprised at this, as 'asylum seeker' is a term that is used frequently in the news and media. Throughout this research I have made a conscious effort to remain person-centred, serving as a reminder that the young people "are children first, and asylum seekers or refugees second. These young people have to face all the usual

challenges of living through childhood and adolescence, but with the added strain of living in a different culture, country and different context” (BPS, 2018, p. 9). For this reason, I have not labelled the individuals who took part in this research as participants but instead referred to them as young people.

3.0 Ethical Considerations

The process of submitting the ethics application was time consuming and required filling in a lengthy online application and submitting supporting documents to the University, however it was vital that the application was thorough. The ethics application was started in January 2024 and was approved in April. Ethical considerations are vital in order to protect research participants and to ensure that no harm happens to them (Miller, 2003). Many supervision sessions were spent discussing the ethical considerations that needed to be made, including consent, confidentiality, whether a translator would be required, recording the interviews and the potential impact of the interview questions on the wellbeing of the young people.

Time was spent speaking with the ethics committee regarding consent issues, as the participants were over 16, I was informed that guardian consent was not necessary. However, as the young people spoke English as an additional language and I was not certain about their language proficiency, I provided the young people with a child-friendly version of the consent form and sought to gain social worker consent in order to provide the young people with a fair chance to give voluntary, informed consent.

It was important to mitigate any potentially emotionally challenging questions as the young people may have encountered previous traumatic experiences. Therefore, I decided to keep the questions focused on their experiences of the college. There was no funding for a translator, thus it was not possible to secure one, as such the advice of college staff was sought regarding which groups were likely to have sufficient English skills to communicate comfortably in the interviews. I was advised that these were the upper groups eight to 12 which were working around GCSE level English.

I understood that gathering the views of young people, particularly those from UASC backgrounds, would present added ethical challenges. By gaining the views of UASC, this required extra ethical considerations including gaining consent, safeguarding, potential traumatisation and issues of power and vulnerability. Despite these complexities, it was very important to me to ensure that their voices were heard directly to share their experiences. Subsequently, I was conscious that it was important to approach the research with sensitivity and responsibility to ensure that the young people taking part were protected from potential harm.

The ethics committee held a panel each month, with a limited number of spaces for each panel. This created some uncertainty around whether my application would be considered in the same month that it was submitted or whether I would need to wait until the next panel meeting. Around five resubmissions and edits were made to the ethics application following supervisor and committee feedback. This involved editing language used in the consent form to make it more child friendly, clarifying who the gatekeeper was and editing the PowerPoint presentation to recruit participants.

4.0 Recruitment

After gaining ethical approval, I contacted the gatekeeper to gain permission to begin explaining to the potential participants the focus of the research and what would be required of them. As the college is very large with different levels of management, it took a few weeks of multiple emails with the gatekeeper and calls with Human Resources before I was given permission to begin recruiting participants. Having the gatekeeper support the access to the college, where there are potential participants, made the process more efficient (Heath et al., 2007).

With the support of the pastoral lead, I was able to present my recruitment PowerPoint presentation to the young people who met the inclusion criteria. Unfortunately, due to attendance issues and with the young people being in the college at different times, this meant that I needed to make multiple visits to the college to ensure that I could present my research to all the potential participants. The recruitment PowerPoint presentation was chosen instead of a poster as this meant that it was more interactive and personal. The young people were able to ask me any questions, and I was also able to clarify their understanding of the research. This felt particularly important when carrying out research with young people who may have never experienced academic research or who may have different expectations of what the process would involve. By presenting the recruitment PowerPoint I felt I was able to also build rapport with the young people, I could introduce myself as the researcher and provide reassurance that I have genuine interest in listening and learning about their experiences and their perspectives.

Following the recruitment PowerPoint presentation and gaining consent from the young people, I sought consent from the potential participants' social workers. This process required perseverance and patience as many social workers had large caseloads and potentially had limited capacity to respond. Over the following weeks I sent multiple follow up emails, I also made phone calls to the social workers and answered any queries they had. The difficulties in gaining consent from social workers highlighted the pressures that currently exist within social services (Ravalier et al., 2021). I was cognisant of the complex caseloads and other pressures that social workers were under and subsequently ensured

that I gave time before following up in order to maintain respectful communication, whilst also advocating for the young people's participation. Following gaining social worker consent, I made contact with the young people to arrange a time for the research interview to take place, however unfortunately some of the potential participants did not respond. Due to the initial interest shown and the time spent following up with social workers it was at first disheartening, however I remained motivated to continue to recruit more young people. After discussing with my supervisor and the pastoral lead, it was decided to broaden the inclusion criteria to include more young people. Subsequently, the time required to have been attending the college was updated from at least one year to six months. This meant that I could present my research to an increased number of students at the college, however it also signified that some of the young people would not have experienced the recent changes made to the college's ESOL department and would only be aware of the college's current set-up.

If time constraints had not been a limiting factor, I would have carried out further interviews with staff at the college in order to gain their perspectives and contribute to an increased holistic understanding of UASC. Gathering staff views may have enhanced understanding of the support systems that exist. However, it was decided that I would speak to a few members of staff, prior to the interviews with the young people, in order to gain some contextual information about the college and the support that is provided to UASC.

Access to the potential participants was supported by the pastoral member of staff at the college who organised the timetable of meetings, he was able take into account inconsistent attendance and other life issues of the young people. This may have influenced who was invited to meet with me when I presented my recruitment PowerPoint (Clark, 2010). It is important to note ethically however, that this was necessary in order to protect the young people who potentially have additional emotional needs or need support to safely engage in the research process. Whilst the young people were aware that they did not have to take part, some may have felt pressured due to power dynamics or cultural expectations (Heath et al., 2007), as such it was made clear on the consent forms and during my presentation that it was not mandatory and their choice if they wanted to participate.

5.0 Methodology and Analysis

I had limited experience with purely qualitative research prior to beginning the doctorate in 2022 and subsequently I felt nervous about the prospect of writing and conducting my thesis. In 2016 I had completed my undergraduate dissertation, and in 2020 I completed my master's dissertation, employing mixed methods research for both projects. In 2023 I carried out my small-scale research project, again using mixed methods research. I had previous experience of using thematic analysis in my master's dissertation, but I had not

carried out 'reflexive thematic analysis' or 'Big Q' approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). Choosing a fully qualitative method was daunting and the scale of this research felt unfamiliar. Reflecting on this now however, I have enjoyed the freer aspects of qualitative research and being more person-centred. I spent time speaking about my concerns in supervision, these were mostly centred around carrying out the thematic analysis. Following suggestions, I purchased the thematic analysis practical guide (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and read through it diligently. I was curious to see that they viewed qualitative research as "more messy, more convoluted and more surprising than we thought it would be" (Gherhardi & Turner, 2002, as cited in Nadar, 2019, p. 80). This was refreshing to recall when encountering theme boundary issues, as this process definitely felt "more messy" than I had anticipated. The guide was helpful throughout my research journey, especially when considering my positioning as a researcher, when introducing me to thematic analysis and subsequently supporting me to confirm that this was fitting for my research. Prior to this I was interested in exploring interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA has been used frequently in previous research with refugees and populations seeking asylum (e.g. Farmbrough, 2014; Fuller & Hayes, 2020). However, after having carried out further reading and discussions with my supervisor, it was decided that thematic analysis may be more suitable as the research is interested in exploring broader themes across the young people's experiences of the college.

Reflexive thematic analysis was also well suited to my epistemological and ontological perspectives. Prior to beginning the doctorate I had never considered my epistemological or ontological views. When learning about these fundamental areas of philosophy in Year one of the doctorate, I remember feeling overwhelmed and unsure about the meanings. I understood the impact and influence this would have on my research; thus, I spent time looking at other doctoral theses to understand more about the different epistemological and ontological stances. In year 2, I explored Burr's (2015) accounts of social constructionism and began to understand how this fitted more with my research. A relativist ontological stance with a social constructionist epistemological approach allowed me to explore the young people's experiences and how they have been shaped by social and institutional contexts. This stance fits well with my world view as I do not believe that there is one single objective truth to be found and instead feel that it is more appropriate to explore and respect individual constructions of people's world and experiences. Braun and Clarke (2021) noted how social constructionist thematic analysis researchers are not "searching to uncover treasures in the ground" instead they are "like an artist or maker, a composer, a storyteller, creating something with her tools and techniques, skills and cultural resources" (p. 296). I thought this was a wonderful simile to depict the journey that I was soon to be embarking on. As I reflect on my experience of conducting the research I felt it

was important to tell the stories of the young people and recognise that it was my own interpretation of their words which had been influenced by my own background and my own lived experiences.

5.1 Data Collection

Following gaining the necessary consent and arranging a time and space in the college to meet with each young person, I began to carry out the interviews. I recall feeling nervous before the first interview, I had no previous experience of carrying out research interviews. I was anxious that the young person would not turn up and that they would also feel worried. I ensured I spent time first building rapport with them and making sure that they felt comfortable. I provided the young person with a list of the questions and gave them time to read through it while I set up my laptop. I asked if they had any queries or if there was anything they wanted more clarification on. I confirmed if they were happy for me to record our conversation and showed that it would only be our voices that I was recording. I also reminded the young people that there were no right or wrong answers and that I was just interested in hearing their views. I recall after my first interview feeling emotional for the young person as they had shared that their journey to the UK had been challenging. Prior to beginning my research, the only information surrounding UASC had been from news stories and the media, however now it felt alarmingly real to converse with this young person about his experiences. This reinforced my motivation and engagement with the research, I felt a renewed sense of drive to ensure that UASC are receiving appropriate care and support and have the opportunity to have their voices heard.

Following each of the interviews, I made reflection notes and points to ensure I was exploring their responses fully. Often the young people would respond in shorter sentences which required follow up prompts and support to gather further information. Sometimes it was difficult to understand what a young person had said, as such it was necessary to clarify to ensure I was accurately gathering their views. I was also conscious that the young people may find it difficult to understand me, as such I made sure to speak clearly and at a slower pace. Following the interviews, and after listening to the transcripts, it became apparent that some of the young people found the concept of 'wellbeing' difficult to understand. Thus, I followed the data and asked more open questions that were not theoretically driven, as I realised that the concept of wellbeing was not culturally or linguistically understood. In research, it has also been noted that wellbeing is complex, multifaceted and does not have a consensus or one definition (Bautista et al., 2023). However, I had initially approached the definition of wellbeing as a combination of positive emotion, engagement, meaning, relationships, and accomplishment (PERMA), in line with Seligman's (2011) research. Instead, it was realised that the research was exploring the young people's perspectives of

the support in place within their college. The young people's responses provided further understanding of the emotional and educational support that they may value within the college. Subsequently, the research questions were adjusted to reflect the young people's perspectives, and this therefore shaped the direction of the research. Reflecting on the interview process, I feel that a pilot interview would have been beneficial in supporting me to gain confidence and experience in the interview process, to further explore any methodological issues and to test my interview questions (Majid et al., 2017). I could have also trialed and offered the use of drawing to help the young people to express themselves, although this may have been less appropriate given their ages. The young people mostly seemed confident to express themselves, however at times some young people appeared to struggle with some of the questions where they had to provide examples such as how staff had "accommodated religious practices". I supported this by simplifying language where possible, explaining what was meant by "accommodate" and including examples such as using the prayer room.

5.2 The Analysis Journey

Following the data collection, I felt excited to begin the analysis. I followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis practical guide, reading one chapter then carrying out the relevant step. The first step involved familiarisation with the data, this included listening multiple times to the recorded interviews and checking the transcriptions for accuracy. This was more challenging at times as it was hard to understand some pronunciations of words. This meant I had to re-listen and play the recordings slower in order to accurately understand their views. I then made familiarisation doodles which supported me to immerse myself further in each of the young person's interviews. On these doodles I noted down their country of origin, their hobbies, how they felt about college, their teachers and their peers. The familiarisation doodles were something I had never done before when conducting research, however I felt that it was effective and allowed me to explore the transcripts in more detail. I recall noting that there were some similarities between the familiarisation doodles for each young person, this included them talking about peers and having close relationships with the staff. I was conscious of my own positioning when listening to the transcripts, I was particularly aware of power dynamics as I was older and British, and felt that the young people perhaps would be afraid to share anything that they felt needed improving within the college. However, some young people did feel comfortable to express changes that needed to be made and shared that they felt there needed to be more challenging lessons, an increase in classes and that there were too many students now at the college.

I next began to code, I recall feeling worried about choosing the wrong codes or not capturing the data in a meaningful way. Braun and Clarke's (2021) book once again supported my thinking and approach to the coding. I found that keeping my coding online and using the Microsoft Word comment function meant the process was neater and felt more contained. I feel that this meant the process was less time-consuming than printing and cutting out the transcripts. This consisted of both inductive and deductive coding, as existing literature did inform some of the codes made. With the initial coding I decided to stay closer to the data as it felt safer, inductive coding supported me to feel more comfortable when first navigating the young people's interviews. I also did not want to overinterpret what the young people were saying. Deductive coding increased when I was reviewing the codes, creating cluster codes and I began to think about the themes. An example of this is that literature exploring attachment (Allen & Kern, 2017; Bowlby, 1958; CDC, 2009; Horgan & Ni Raghallaigh, 2017) came to mind as I saw several codes relating to having secure relationships with peers and staff. I was unsure if I had truly finished the coding section, and I was not certain if I ever would feel ready to move on to the next step, however I was reassured by Braun and Clarke that reflexive thematic analysis is not a linear process.

I then moved on to generating initial themes and then developing and reviewing the themes, which was found to be challenging. I kept revisiting and adapting and I felt there was overlap between some themes. This required further exploration and discussions within supervision to ensure that my themes answered my research question. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021) I engaged in answering reflective questions to support my thinking around the themes. In particular, considering the boundaries of each theme was useful. I drew mind maps which evolved over time, changing to ensure the theme definitions were clear and thorough. Again, this phase of the analysis was difficult as it felt I was continuously adapting the themes. Taking time away in between the initial theme generation and the developing and reviewing of themes was particularly beneficial as I could revisit with a fresh perspective and feeling less entwined. By coming back to the themes refreshed, it made it easier to question why I had chosen to make certain decisions, particularly around the separation of staff support and meaningful relationships. I found it useful to write down my decision for separating these two themes, which was to have the first theme focusing on what the staff had done to support the young people, whilst theme two, subtheme one, referred to the impact of the support and the subsequent relationships formed. My reflections and theme generation maps can be seen in Appendix K.

The key ideas from the young people were around relationships, the support of the staff and the importance of the language. I felt reassured that I had encountered these ideas previously when conducting the literature review. I was initially surprised to see how prevalent the ideas of hope and ambitions were, it was important for me to reflect on this and

understand why I was not expecting the young people to discuss this as much. I feel that this may be due to the deficit view that is often portrayed of UASC and how much research focuses on their traumatic experiences and the subsequent impact. I also recall feeling sad and surprised that some of the young people felt limited by the courses they could access. Initially, I had not considered theories of attachment or that this research would align with school belonging and feelings of connectedness. This led me to carry out further reading into attachment and belonging in order to link the research to the theory.

6.0 Impact of the Research

As Braun and Clarke (2021) suggested, I integrated the discussion into the analysis within the empirical chapter which was helpful as it reduced repetition. I did not begin this research with the intention of carrying out a study exploring school belonging, following the analysis I tested out the data against conceptual frameworks of belonging including the bio-psycho-socio-ecological model (BPSEM) (Allen & Kern, 2017). The BPSEM of school belonging is a multi-systemic model which has some relevant links to the themes generated in the current research. However, broader explorations of belonging were found to be more fitting including findings from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2009) which shed light on four factors which foster a sense of connectedness to the school setting, these include adult support, belonging to a positive peer group, commitment to education and the school environment (p, 5). In addition, Goodenow and Grady's definition of school belonging "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (1993, p. 80) appears to be a helpful way of understanding the experiences of UASC within the college. The themes generated highlight the importance of connection, relationships, language, staff-support, space to learn and hope for the future.

I have grown in confidence with research over these two years. My prior experiences of research were shorter, less in depth experiences, whereas I have been able to learn and grow so much from the thesis journey. Carrying out qualitative research has challenges, and throughout this process I have had to develop my reflexivity, challenge my assumptions and consider my positionality. I have developed practice in using supervision in ways which are effective for me and conducive to my development, through engaging in open communication. Having regular opportunity to clarify queries with my supervisor has been instrumental in this process which has also positively impacted my journey to becoming an EP.

This process has also highlighted that I do have the capacity to explore what I believe in and what I am passionate about. I am glad that I continued to gather young people's perspectives, despite adding additional challenges and ethical barriers. This has

subsequently broadened my understanding of UASC and their experiences, I was amazed and inspired by their aspirations, hope and optimism for the future. I hope that the themes and practical tools section within chapter 2 will be helpful to the college and also other educational settings and EPs who are working with and supporting UASC.

6.1 Challenges and Limitations

Within the empirical section, I referred to the potential limitations and biases of my research, drawing upon the reflexive thematic analysis reporting guidelines (Braun and Clarke, 2024), and Yardley's (2000) principles of quality within qualitative research. Some of these limitations included possible social desirability in the young people's responses and that questions mainly focused on positive aspects of their college experiences. It is important to note that many criticisms of reflexive thematic analysis stem from a positivist approach, such as reliability and generalisability (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To ensure rigour, I followed Braun and Clarke's steps within the practical guide and engaged in reflexive journaling and prompts regarding positioning. I also frequently discussed my thinking within supervision in order to enhance reflexivity, methodological rigour and transparency in my decisions. The transparency and detail in my approach as outlined in the empirical chapter adds to the potential transferability of my research.

Furthermore, it is acknowledged by Braun and Clarke (2021) that all of the data is interpreted by the researcher. As such the data is shaped by the interactions between the researcher and those participating in the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which is considered to be a strength instead of a limitation. This is due to acknowledging the active role of the researcher and the co-construction of data which increases transparency and reflexivity. Throughout the analysis and discussion, I was also conscious of the language used, I did not make claims that themes 'emerged', instead I shared that they were generated by me. In line with Braun and Clarke's practical guide, I did not position myself as a detective uncovering 'findings', instead I was aware that I was representing broader patterns from the data.

6.2 Proposed dissemination

It was important for my research to be impactful and to shed light on the perspectives of UASC within a college setting. I will provide a summary of the research with the college and the young people who took part if they requested this on their consent forms.

Whilst carrying out my research, I have learned that EPs should have more of a role working with UASC. The profession is well placed to promote the strong relationships and supportive environments in schools and colleges, which the research suggests may be valued by the young people and supportive of their educational and emotional needs. EPs

can also support in a systemic way, especially considering the difficulties UASC may encounter if they are entering the educational system late, as there may be misidentification of special educational needs or difficulties accessing support.

It is hoped that I will disseminate my research within my educational psychology service and other services which could be delivered as part of continued professional development. EPs are well suited to work with UASC and subsequently from this research they may be able to learn more about the different ways they can provide support. I would also hope to publish my research through journals such as Educational Psychology in Practice to add to the small but growing body of educational psychology research involving UASC.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Table of research exploring UASC's experiences in the UK

Author	Purpose	Methodology and Sample	Relevant Findings
Chase & Statham (2013)	To explore the emotional wellbeing of UASC and implications for policy and practice	- Interviews, inductive methodology based on the grounded theory approach 29 young girls/women, 25 boys/young men all 11-23 years old from 18 different countries	- UASC experience ongoing struggles with uncertainty and stigma - Ontological security, interpersonal connections and routine is important for wellbeing
Chase et al. (2008)	To explore factors affecting wellbeing and mental health of UASC from their perspectives	54 UASC and 31 professionals working in social care, education and mental health services	- Opportunities to integrate young people and support them to socialise - Young people over 16 tended to have express more anxieties - Young people can struggle to identify with Western notions of mental health - Importance of collaborative support from services
Chase (2013)	Aimed to explore what contributes to UASC's	Same sample as Chase & Statham (2013)	Wellbeing is not just about immediate safety but also having a sense of belonging, long-term stability and fulfilment.

	wellbeing through the lens of ontological security		
Bhatti-Sinclair, (2021)	To assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the welfare services available to UASC 16-25	Based on an empirical study adopting a case work approach	- During the lockdown UASC were more isolated - UASC were less inclined to engage with professional support - UASC had increased vulnerability - UASC were neglected and exploited
Farmbrough (2014)	To explore the factors contributing to wellbeing, social connection and educational success of UASC	- Semi-structured interviews with 12 male UASC - Focus group with 6 staff from the social work team - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used	- Staff at the asylum centre where the UASC lived were the main source of emotional support - The importance of social connectedness - Psycho-social approach to support UASC's mental health
Fuller & Hayes (2020).	Aims to develop an understanding of how unaccompanied asylum seeking minors (UASMs) view and experience education	6 UASMs living in the UK took part in interviews - The research employed IPA	Education plays an important role in supporting UASM, but additional support mechanisms are also needed, such as resources catering to individual learning needs and addressing wider systemic issues that challenge UASMs educational progress.

Hopkins and Hill (2008)	To explore pre-flight experiences and migration journeys of UASC residing in Scotland.	• 30 UASC in Scotland, mostly males from African countries • Over 70 service providers including social workers, health professionals and teachers • Interviews and participatory methods	• UASC's pre-flight experiences often included the loss of parents, trauma, war, violence and rape • UASC's journeys were often long and traumatic • The need for services to understand and consider UASC's trauma and dislocation • This highlights the importance of child centered research
Hopkins (2008)	Exploring key ethical and methodological challenges when conducting research with UASC	• Drew from Hopkins and Hill (2008), funded by the Scottish Refugee Council.	• The research highlighted the importance and complexities of obtaining informed consent, issues with existing power imbalances, privacy and confidentiality, importance of the research design. • A further issue included ethics not being rigid and adapting to children's needs.
Kohli and Mather (2003)	Exploring existing research into vulnerability and resilience from refugee related literature	• This paper reviews literature	• UASC have vulnerabilities linked with separation and trauma • Therapeutic care which builds on UASC's sense of belonging can aid the process of self-recovery
Kohli (2006)	Investigating the stories of UASC and how well the social workers know their experiences	• Interviews with 29 social workers	• Social workers understood the young people in their care's silence and created safe, trusting environments

			For many UASC silence was a form of self-protection to avoid reliving trauma or impact their asylum case.
Koli (2011)	Consider what safety and belonging means to UASC	Presents a conceptual framework that synthesises existing research on UASC	- UASC awaiting an asylum decision regarding their status can be in febrile states and seek assurances from others - Practitioner support is effective when they are reliable, practically helpful and emotionally attuned to the UASC in their care
Morgan (2018)	Explore the perspectives of UASC and their educational experiences in addition to college and school staff's experiences of supporting UASC's educational needs	- Semi-structured interviews with 6 educational professionals and 6 UASC - A cycle of 3 Group supervision with 4-5 educational professionals	- The uncertainty of UASC's asylum status and the fluency of their English language is found to have a significant impact on UASC's social and emotional wellbeing - Barriers to language can subsequently impact UASC's ability to access the curriculum and experience inclusion
Ott and O'Higgins (2019)	To understand the educational provision for UASC in the UK	12 semi-structured interviews with educational professionals	Gaps in data and provision were found, highlighting the need for an integration focused framework to better support the needs of UASC.
Sanchez et al. (2012)	To describe the level of psychological distress within a group of UASC and their contact to a mental health service	71 UASC completed self-report questionnaires regarding traumatic events and socio-	UASC experienced high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder and emotional symptoms. Despite this only 17% were in contact with mental health services.

		demographic data was collected.	
Thomas et al. (2004)	To explore the experiences of UASC pre-flight in order to support their arrival in the UK	• Semi-structured interviews with 100 UASC • Case file and legal statement review	• UASC have often experienced and witnessed violence and separation. Sexual violence was also reported by almost a quarter of African girls. • Culturally appropriate research is needed to further identify their needs after they have arrived to the UK.
Ward (2022)	Relaying how UASC's sense of belonging in educational settings can be supported by practitioners	• Interviews with 6 practitioners including an ESOL teacher	• Staff interacting with UASC in educational settings can support their sense of belonging through developing trauma awareness, engaging in reflexive practice and effectively communicating with those who have low levels of English
Wilkinson (2016)	To evaluate the availability and effectiveness of educational and vocational interventions which are aimed to support the employability of UASC and their social integration	• Semi-structured interviews with 38 professionals including teachers and social workers and 15 UASC • Analysis used the constant comparative method	• The current system is not serving the best interests of UASC as they are not meeting their educational and vocational needs • Further targeted intervention is needed to support UASC's employability and integration

Appendix B: Semi-structured interview questions

Example Questions

Prompts are set out underneath the questions.

1. Please could you confirm that you are happy with this interview being recorded, audio only?

2. How are you today?

There are no right or wrong answers, I'm interested in finding out more about your views and experiences.

3. Please could you tell me a little bit about yourself, such as your name, how old you are, any hobbies and where you are from?

4. Did you have any previous experience of education before arriving in the UK?

Are you happy to tell me a bit more about that?

5. What makes you feel happy and comfortable in school?

6. Is mental health and wellbeing something that is discussed within school?

Do teachers talk about wellbeing?

Is it something you discuss with friends?

7. What have been your experiences of college this past year?

(Further questions will be asked to follow up depending on their responses)

If positive, investigate what has been particularly positive.

If negative, explore what has been difficult in particular.

8. Are there any further changes you would make to the college?

(Further questions will be asked to follow up depending on their responses)

9. How could staff support your education better within college?

(Further questions will be asked to follow up depending on their responses)

10. How could staff support your well-being better within college?

(Further questions will be asked to follow up depending on their responses)

11. Are there any services within the college that you are having difficulty accessing, such as pastoral support or career advice?

If yes, what could help you access these services better?

12. Any further comments - Are there any further things you would like to share?

Any other recommendations for improvements

Appendix C: Ethical Approval

Ethics ETH2324-1338 : Miss Isabel Sharma

Date Created	20 Jan 2024
Date Submitted	13 Feb 2024
Date of last resubmission	12 Apr 2024
Date forwarded to committee	12 Apr 2024
Researcher	Miss Isabel Sharma
Category	PGR
Supervisor	Dr Alistair James
Faculty	Faculty of Social Sciences
Current status	Approved after amendments made

Ethics application

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School/Department
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

Category
PGR

Primary Supervisor

Name of Primary Supervisor

[Dr Alistair James](#)

Primary Supervisor's school/department
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

Project details

Project title

Exploring Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children's Perceptions of Education and Factors
Contributing to their Wellbeing within a UK College Setting

Project start date

29 Apr 2024

Appendix D1: Recruitment Research Presentation



1





Exploring Children and Young People's Views of Education and Factors Contributing to Their Wellbeing Within a UK College Setting

Aims:

1. What factors contribute to your wellbeing?
2. What factors contribute to your positive educational experiences?

3



We are looking for young people who

...

Please note that we need 6-8 young people, as such it may not be possible for everyone who wants to take part to be able to participate

- are 16-19 years old
- are staying in the UK on your own and have a social worker
- attended this college for at least 6 months
- are in groups 8 to 12 in ESOL

4

What to expect ...

- A conversation where we explore your views about the college
- Will last around 30 minutes
- This will be carried out in person at college
- The questions will be about how your college supports you and your wellbeing
- You can stop talking to me at any time if you don't want to talk to me anymore.
- If you say it's ok, I will record what you say with an audio recorder



Example Questions...

- What makes you feel happy and comfortable in school?
- What have been your experiences of college this past year?

5

What to expect ...

- I won't tell anyone else what you say to me, except if you talk about someone hurting you or about you hurting yourself or someone else. Then I might need to tell someone outside of the study to keep you and other people safe.
- All the information that I have about you from the study will be stored in a safe place and I will look after it very carefully.
- I will write a report about the study and show it to other people, but I won't put your name in the report, and no one will know that you're in the study.



6



Any questions?



Researcher - I.Sharma@uea.ac.uk
Supervisor - Alistair.James@uea.ac.uk

Appendix D2: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form



University of East
Anglia
Norwich Research
Park
Norwich. NR4 7TJ

Email: i.sharma@uea.ac.uk
... .

Isabel Sharma
Trainee Educational Psychologist

05.04.2024

Exploring Children and Young People's Perceptions of Education and Factors Contributing to their Wellbeing within a UK College Setting

Study Information Sheet



Hello. My name is Isabel Sharma and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia.

I am doing a study to find out more about your views on education and factors that help your wellbeing.

I am asking you to be in my study because I am really interested in hearing your views about your college. You can decide if you want to take part in the study or not, it's up to you.

This sheet tells you what I will ask you to do if you decide to take part in this study. Please read it carefully.

If you decide you want to be in the study and then you change your mind later, that's ok. All you need to do is tell me that you don't want to be in the study anymore before we have analysed and published the results. We will remove any information you may have already provided. You, or your social worker can email me I.Sharma@uea.ac.uk

If you have any questions you can speak to me during the study or your family or your social worker can email me. If you want to, you can contact me on I.Sharma@uea.ac.uk.

What will happen if I say that I want to be in the study?

- If you decide that you want to be in my study, I will invite you to come for a conversation, where I will ask you some questions.
- The conversation will take place at college.
- The questions will be about how your college supports you and your wellbeing.
- When I ask you questions, you can choose which ones you want to answer.
- If you don't want to talk about something, that's ok. You can stop talking to me at any time if you don't want to talk to me anymore.
- If you say it's ok, I will record what you say with an audio recorder.

Will anyone else know what I say in the study?

ETH2324-1338



I won't tell anyone else what you say to me, except if you talk about someone hurting you or about you hurting yourself or someone else. Then I might need to tell someone outside of the study to keep you and other people safe.

All the information that I have about you from the study will be stored in a safe place and I will look after it very carefully. I will write a report about the study and show it to other people, but I won't put your name in the report, and no one will know that you're in the study. I may also share your information with other researchers and use it for teaching and outreach purposes, but I will take out your name.



How long will the study take?

In total it may take around 30 minutes. You can choose how long you want to talk to me for and how much detail you answer in. You can have breaks if you need them.

Are there any good things about being in the study?



You won't get anything for being in the study, but you will be helping me do my research which may help other children and young people with their experiences of education in the future. Also, by talking things through with me about your educational experiences you may become aware of things which may help you.

Are there any bad things about being in the study?



This study will take up some of your time, but I am not expecting it to be bad for you or cost you anything.

Will you tell me what you learned in the study at the end?

Yes, I will if you want me to. If you email me when I finish the study (July 2025), I will tell you what I learned in a one-page summary. I.sharma@uea.ac.uk

What if I am not happy with the study or the people doing the study?



If you are not happy with how I am doing the study or how I treat you, then you or your social worker can:

- Tell me during the study.
- Email me: i.sharma@uea.ac.uk
- Email my supervisor: Alistair.james@uea.ac.uk
- Email my Head of School: Yann Lebeau, Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk

How do I know that this study is ok to take part in?



All research I undertake is checked and approved by an Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia before I can start it.

What if I want to know more about the information collected on me in the study?



When we talk in the study, I will collect some information which is unique to you. I can only collect this information if I have a reason to do so. My reason to do so for this study is because the study is in the public interest.

This information is stored by me within the University of East Anglia. They help me protect your information and look after it.

If you want to know more about the information collected about you, you can email me i.sharma@uea.ac.uk or you can email the University's Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk) who helps to protect your information. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) helps to protect everyone's information. If you are unhappy with mine or the University Data Protection Officer's responses about your information, you can speak to the [ICO](https://ico.org.uk/).

Further information



This sheet was last updated on 5th April 2024. I will update you if I make any changes to this sheet.

This information sheet is for you to keep.

Participant Consent Form (First Copy to Researcher)

If you are happy to be in the study, please:

- write your name and email in the space below.
- sign your name at the bottom of the page.
- put the date at the bottom of the page.

You should only say 'yes' to being in the study if you know what it is about and you want to be in it. If you don't want to be in the study, don't sign the form.

I, [PRINT NAME], am happy to be in this research study. [PRINT EMAIL]

My social workers name is [PRINT NAME] and their email is [PRINT EMAIL]

In saying yes to being in the study, I am saying that:

- ☐ I know what the study is about.
- ☐ I know what I will be asked to do.
- ☐ Someone has talked to me about the study.
- ☐ My questions have been answered.
- ☐ I know that I don't have to be in the study if I don't want to.
- ☐ I know that I can pull out of the study at any time if I don't want to do it anymore and it will be possible to remove any information I have already provided until my data is anonymised.
- ☐ I know that I don't have to answer any questions that I don't want to answer.
- ☐ I know that the researchers won't tell anyone what I say when I talk to them unless I talk about being hurt by someone or hurting myself or someone else.

Now I am going to ask you circle 'Yes' or 'No' to tell me what you are happy to do or not do in the study.

Are you happy to speak just to me?	Yes	No
Are you happy for me to audio record your voice?	Yes	No
Do you want me to tell you what I learned in the study?	Yes	No

.....
Signature

.....
Date

Appendix E: Guardian Consent Form

GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I,[PRINT GUARDIAN'S NAME], consent to the young person in your care [PRINT YOUNG PERSON'S NAME] participating in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what the young person in my care will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Guardian Information Sheet and have been able to discuss the young person in my care's involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and the young person in my care does not have to take part. My decision whether to let them take part in the study will not affect our relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that the young person in my care can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I understand that the young person in my care may stop the interview at any time if they do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that the young person in my care may refuse to answer any questions they don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about the young person in my care that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about the young person in my care will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

Consent

I agree that is capable to consent to take part in this research.

Print name:

Relationship to young person:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix F: Debrief Sheet

Debrief Sheet

Thank you for your participation in this interview. Your time and efforts are much appreciated.

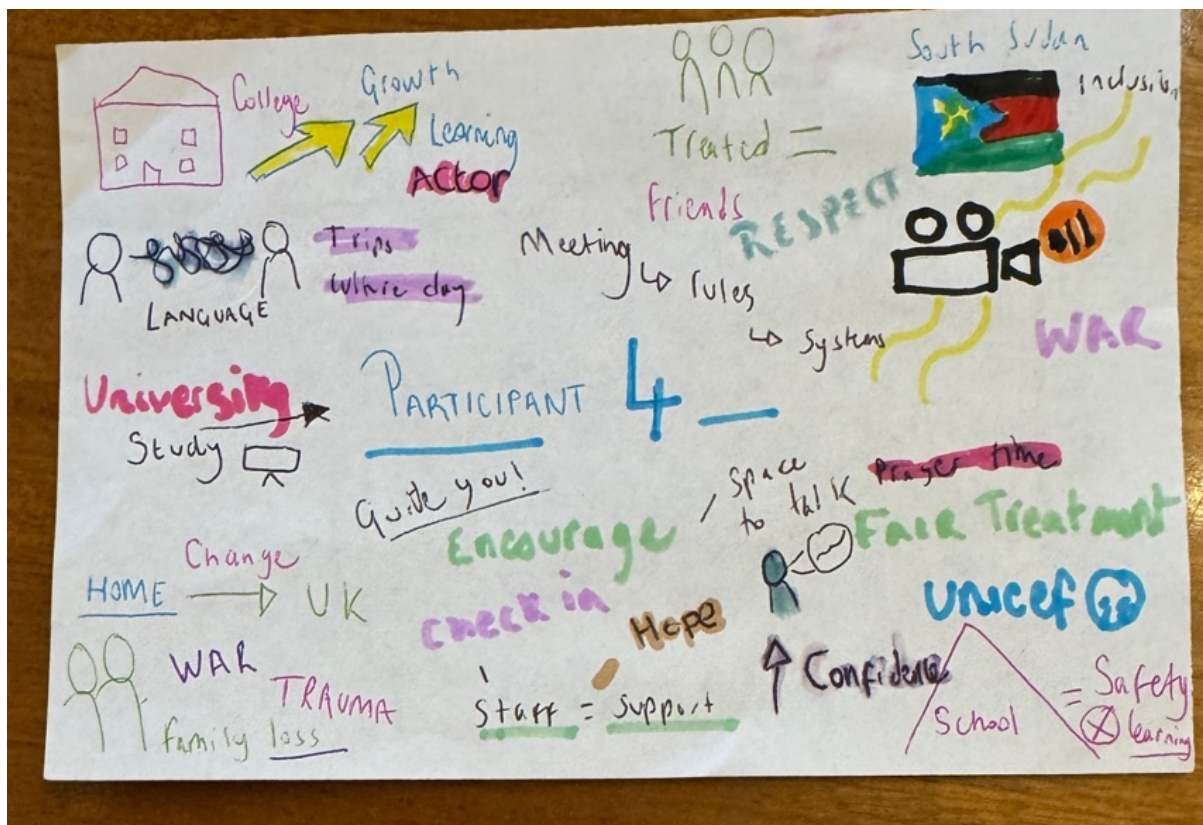
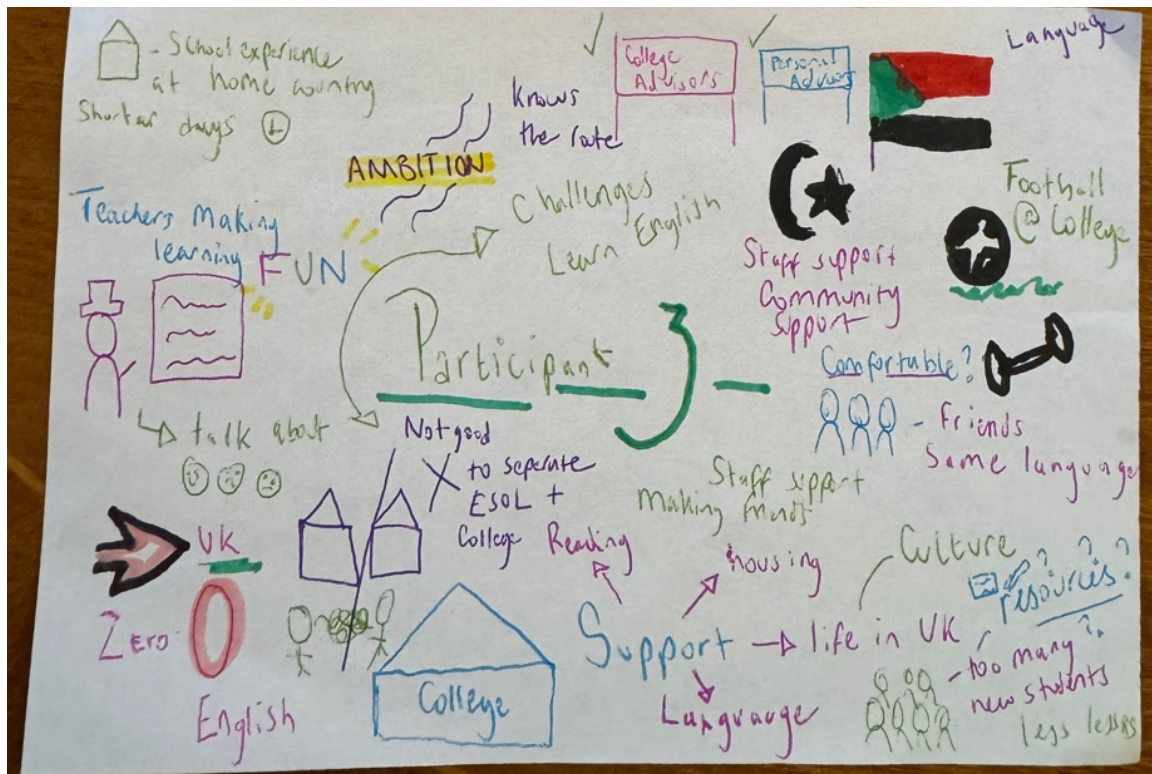
This study is designed to explore **Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children's perceptions of education and factors contributing to their wellbeing within a UK college setting.**

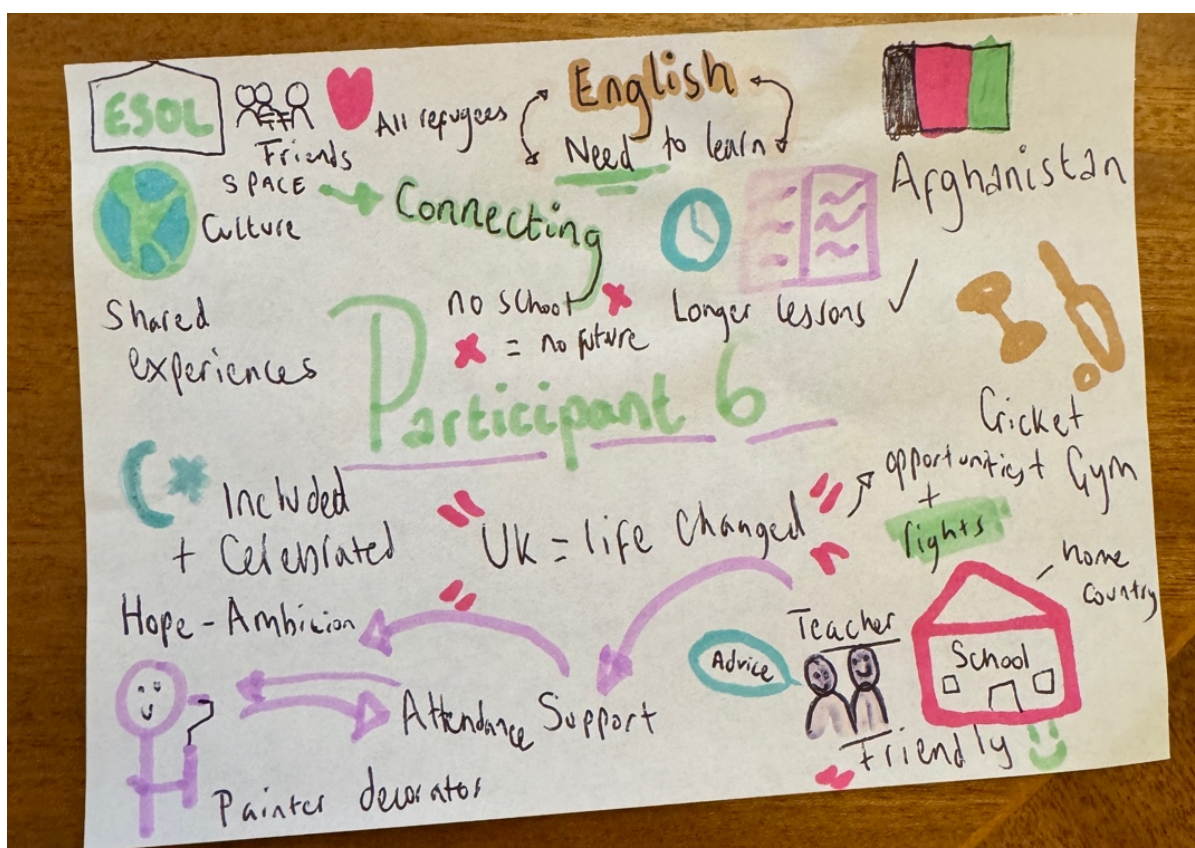
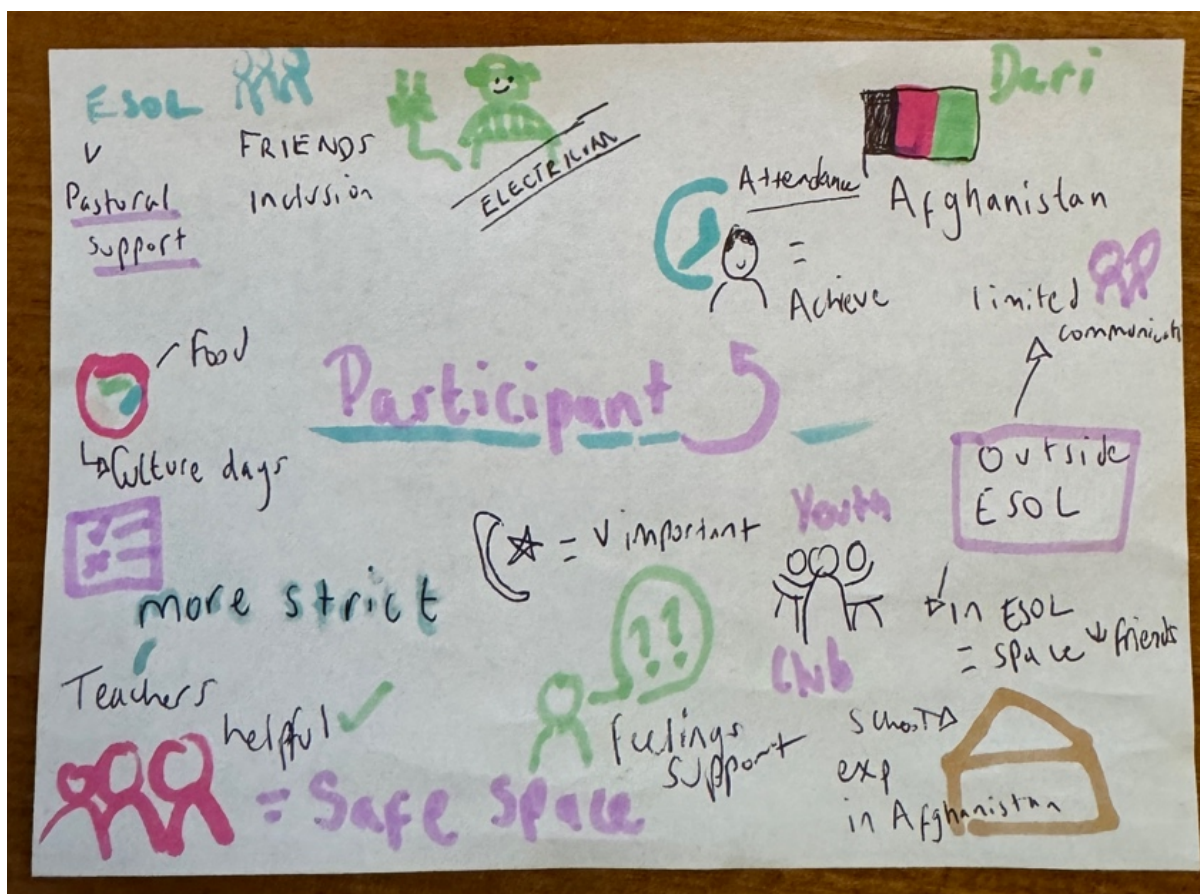
As you are aware, your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results and this would include the submission of the thesis for assessment purposes.

If you have any further questions or concerns and you wish to speak to the researcher, please contact: i.sharma@uea.ac.uk. Alternatively, you may wish to seek support from your pastoral tutor or social worker. If you are feeling distressed, please contact Childline (**0800 1111**) or Text Shout (**Text SHOUT to 85258**) for support.

Additionally, if you have any concerns about the study you may wish to contact the researchers' supervisor: Alistair.james@uea.ac.uk.

Thank you for your participation.







Appendix H: Reflective Diary Entry Example

Reflection: Young Person 7

Second time listening and I am noticing the young person's drive and motivation to wanting to succeed and do well. It appears he is feeling limited to a certain extent. I am feeling very emotional about this, and I am really hoping that he is able to achieve his goals of aviation. I am aware of the news recently, and that some people are feeling annoyed about the number of refugees entering the country and the protests regarding people seeking asylum being housed in hotels. I want to ensure the media discourse is not impacting my interpretations, as such I will come back and listen to this again in a few days to check if my emotional responses have impacted on my interpretation and coding.

Appendix I: Example of Coding

Participant 1:

The positive thing. Also last year it was it wasn't like this one. that it was like outside the ESOL classes. So we don't have like a special place to stay together and have a communicate.

Researcher: Yeah.

Participant 1:

So this year I think this place is comfortable for all of us.

Researcher: Yes, I was going to ask about that because I know that before it was a different setup, wasn't it?

Participant 1: Yeah, it was different set as well. this year they changed it. When after they came here. I think he is a little bit like, a little more comfort. Yeah. So it's it's. Its you need to get which you which you want and easy to find your friends and your teacher. Easy to wear(?) your friends and talk to them.

Participant 1: In ESOL all of us? Yeah. Like like brothers and sisters. Yeah. Like we share everything. We talk together. But when you say every everyone is that I say hi to them. Yeah. They say hi about that's Hmm. So mm hmm In ESOL we are like like we are like family. Oh, yeah. Yeah. So that's a good thing. And they take us out for, for for trips sometimes. Like for Easter trip.

So when you when you, when you go to trip like you can, you can meet people for other group like for example I'm in Group 11 so I can meet a guy from Group One for example. So you can put it together and have them get to know him.

Researcher: Yeah yeah yeah. OK so you can make different friends in different

PARTICIPANT 6: Because of this college it's really help us and for study and for the teacher we have is very nice and you can be learned like friendly and the teacher are very good, all of them. And whatever we have some problem we need to really discuss with the principal and someone and whatever we have and a problem they give me advice and for something, for anything. And I really enjoy.

RESEARCHER: Do you like coming to school? Yeah.

PARTICIPANT 6: Yeah. I really like to come to college. Mm hmm.

RESEARCHER: Mm hmm. And do you think it's important to Have positive emotions?

PARTICIPANT 6: Yeah, because I really want to become a painter decoration (decorator,) yeah, I also talked to XXX and they say we will apply for you or they say a training course and they make me positive energy because of, you know, want to become do my a good business if I can Because of usually we working for someone but this is a chance I have a chance to do my own business.

RESEARCHER: So you feel motivated to get into college?

IS Isabel Sharma (EDU - Postgraduat...

Having a designated space to go and spend time together

IS Isabel Sharma (EDU - Postgraduat...

SOB (Sense of belonging)

IS Isabel Sharma (EDU - Postgraduat...

Feeling comfortable in a designated ESOL space

IS Isabel Sharma (EDU - Postgraduat...

Strong Relationship with others in ESOL

IS Isabel Sharma (EDU - Postgraduat...

Strong Relationship with others in ESOL

IS Isabel Sharma (EDU - Postgraduat...

Staff supporting pupils

IS Isabel Sharma (EDU - Postgraduat...

Positive feelings towards staff

IS Isabel Sharma (EDU - Postgraduat...

Staff guiding pupils

IS Isabel Sharma (EDU - Postgraduat...

Aspirations for the future

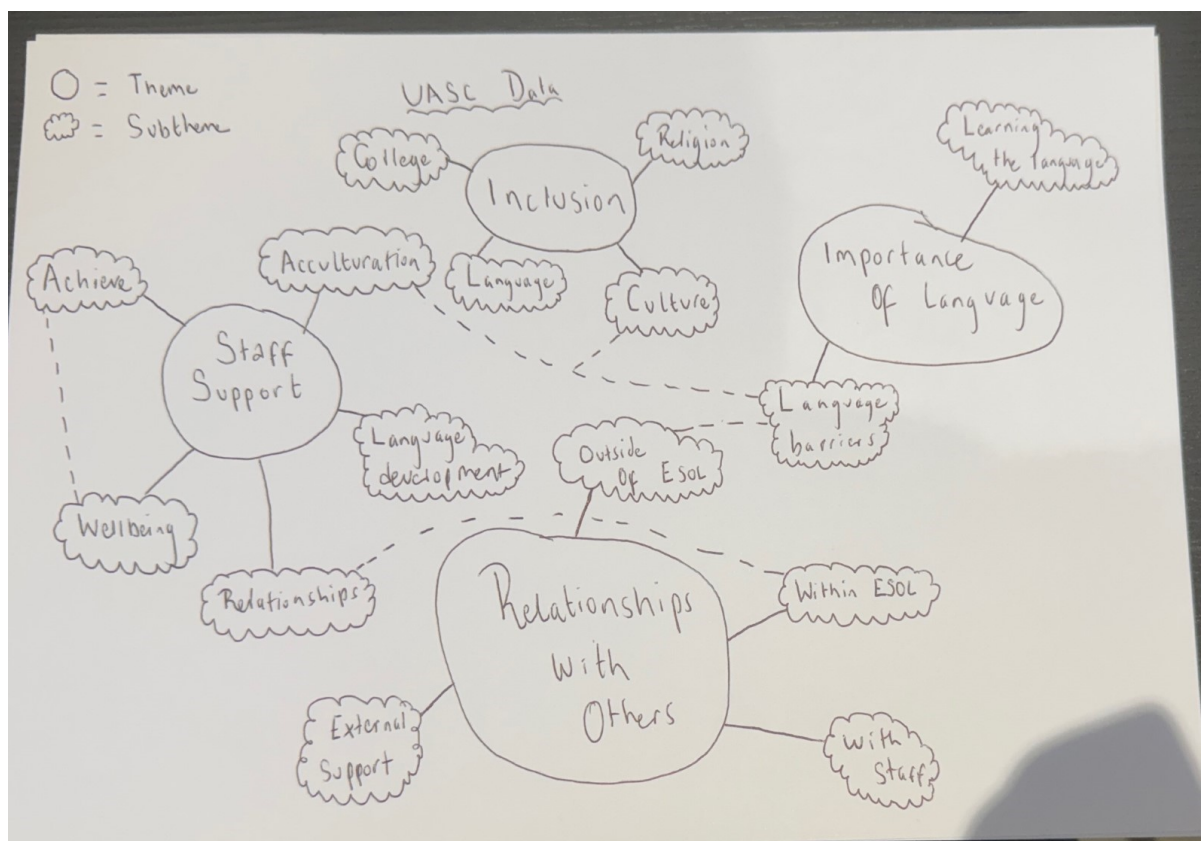
Appendix J: Example of Cluster Codes

Code/Similar code	Data extract (not exhaustive)
Relationship with others in ESOL	P1 : Like like brothers and sisters. Yeah. Like we share everything. We talk together. But when you say every everyone is that I say hi to them. P1: in ESOL we are like like we are like family. P3: I see friends from like my country, who I can speak to them in my language. In my first language and like shares the conversation with them P4: Yeah, yeah, I do. I do have some of my colleague Ive met here P5: I always with the in the break time in with the friends. P6: It's really good and all of them is friendly and we help each other and we love each other and it's really amazing P7: I have got a lot of friends from last year.
Having a designated space	P1: So now we have places here we can see you can visit here and wait for your class yeah and you can talk with your friends with us you can use a computer over there. P2: in restaurant you can go there and reach (read?). Yeah, here also we can have a little bit space. P3: Yeah, it's a good place to come for lunch and breaks P5: yeah, there is a good space because in the break time so lots of people came here we we can speak together. So I think that's good. The other one is just classes and then there is the reception. So you can't stay in the hall. P6: This is just for ESOL student, most of them. Yeah, the this is the office. I know most of them. They're class of ESOL. P7: We have all our break there, over there, we call ESOL area. P7: I think I can find all of my classmates here
Staff support is important	P1: So she helped me how to do my interview. So this this one of the good thing like, the teachers always try to help us. P1: they always they support us just, the teachers they Always keep saying like Go, go, go here and go and come here and stay here. Be positive with others. Talk to them. There always Give us support to do this. P2: Yes a lot the college, especially the (?) teachers, they help me a lot because they're kind and friendly P2: every three months, and one interview with him and he asked me about anything problems issue. P3: telling us how should we deal with the stuff outside of college? Like how should you talk to people? How should you be respect to people if someone being disrespectful to you, how you should deal with it? All these things they used to teach us about it P4: Yeah, they helped me. And they also invited.. other student. P4: Whatever I'm in need of something or some to help me or to help me or with something. I can also come and talk to them P5: So when you ask something like mm hmm give you information about if you don't. If you don't have us so they can search about it, yeah. And they will tell the next day.

Appendix K: Initial Thematic Mapping



- Feel like “space” is too broad. Perhaps, “Navigating School Environments” is better
- Does subtheme, ‘achieve’ need to be refined? - to achieve goals?
Academic/personal?
- Relationships with others – subtheme with staff should change to “positive relationships with staff”, subsequently “positive relationships within ESOL” and “challenging relationships outside of ESOL”
- Instead of ‘Inclusion’ would “experiences of belonging” be better, subthemes – cultural representation, participation and engagement (I could talk more here about their experiences of trips and extra clubs)



Staff support

Personal and academic achievement
Acculturation
Wellbeing
Language development

Experiences of belonging

Cultural representation
Participation and engagement.
Navigating school environments

Importance of language

Learning the language
Language barriers

Relationships with others

Positive relationships within ESOL
Positive relationships with staff
Complex relationships with others outside ESOL

