



**University of
Nottingham**
Institute for Policy and Engagement



Refugee Education UK

Lessons learned from participatory research with refugee young people

An output of the research study
'A Sustainable Place for Inclusive Refugee
Education' (ASPIRE)

June 2025

Purpose of this document

This document serves as a guide to stakeholders as they design and implement youth-centred research projects. It is relevant for local councils, schools, universities, researchers and other organisations interested in involving young people with lived experience of forced displacement in research.

This document details the participatory research approach adopted by Refugee Education UK (REUK) and Professor Joanna McIntyre (from the School of Education at the University of Nottingham) in a project called ASPIRE (A Sustainable Place for Inclusive Refugee Education). ASPIRE explored the formal and non-formal education available to newly arrived young people in two English cities – Nottingham and Oxford. To learn more about the ASPIRE research and to read the various outputs from the project, please visit: www.reuk.org/aspire.

In this document, we reflect on the youth-centred participatory activities adopted in ASPIRE and consider the benefits of involving young people in the research process – from identifying the research questions, to reviewing the tools being used and, ultimately, reviewing the initial findings of the research.

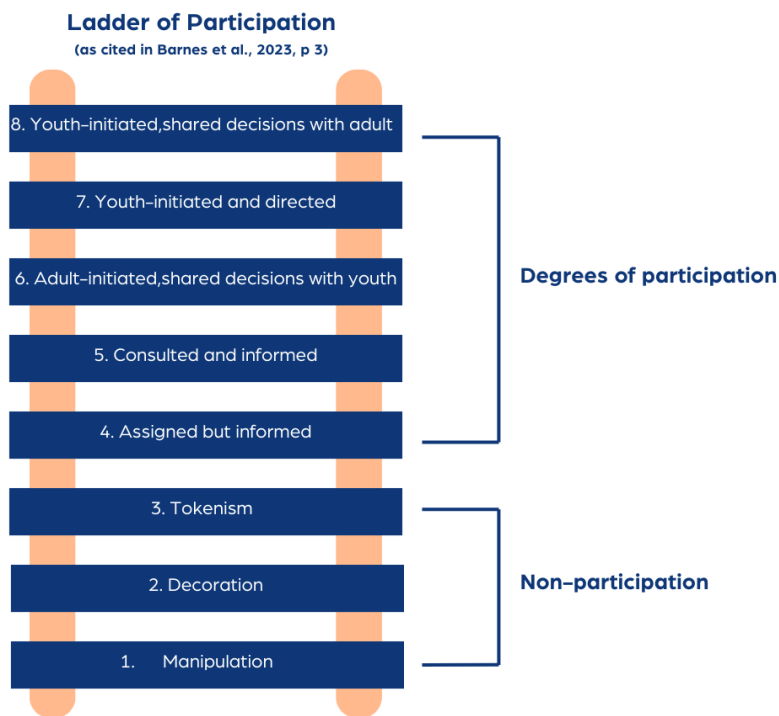
While this document is focused on youth-centred participatory research activities, ASPIRE did have another level of participatory research through an adult expert steering group in each city, which informed the design, implementation and interpretation of the research. To learn more about this, please read the full research report available on www.reuk.org/aspire.

What is participatory research with young people, and why is it important?

Participatory research enables the involvement of those impacted by research in all aspects of the research process, including methodology design, framing research questions, data collection, analysis and reporting on the findings ([Harley and Wazefadost, 2023](#)). It facilitates perspectives and understanding on subjects otherwise not considered by researchers and helps improve the quality and interpretation of data by involving those closest to the research topic ([Harris et al., 2022](#), [Hawke, 2018](#)).

Involving young people in research that has an impact on their lives enables inclusive knowledge production, skills development, meaningful collaboration and can encourage participant engagement ([Harley and Wazefadost, 2023](#); [Webb et al., 2022](#)). It also aligns with global thought on this subject, which calls for involvement of refugee young people as partners in education policy- and decision-making ([Barnes et al., 2023](#)).

There are different approaches and various levels of involvement young people can have in research. Hart's "Ladder of Participation" (shown in the diagram below) provides a helpful framework to understand the varying levels of youth engagement in research (Hart, 1992 as cited in [Barnes et al., 2023](#)).



Throughout the study, the ASPIRE researchers aimed to ensure participation in line with steps 4 and 5 of Hart's ladder of participation. In the next section, we describe the participatory elements of establishing an Experts by Lived Experience group, comprising young people from forced displacement backgrounds.

Establishing an Experts by Lived Experience (EbLE) group

In line with participatory research, ASPIRE sought to prioritise the engagement of those under-represented in research – refugee and asylum-seeking young people – and value their lived experiences as a form of knowledge to inform and strengthen the research process.

We invited refugee and asylum-seeking young people living in Oxford or Nottingham to form an Experts by Lived Experience (EbLE) group. These young people, often invisible in decision-making about refugee education, helped shape the research questions, the methodology, the interpretation of research findings, and the identification of practical outputs.

Two sub-groups were established: one in Oxford and one in Nottingham. The EbLE group included young people who were of the same age as the young people whose educational experiences we were researching (14-19), as well as those who were slightly older (up to the age of 21) and who could reflect on their previous experiences.

Recruitment of the EbLE group

To identify and recruit members of the EbLE group, the research team contacted educational institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) within their networks in both Oxford and Nottingham, providing information on the project, the purpose of the EbLE group, and what would be expected of the young people who joined the group. These

educational institutions and NGOs then approached young people explaining what their involvement would entail in order to gauge their interest in participating.

Our lessons learned from recruitment:

- It is helpful to recruit more young people than required for EbLE groups, as attendance can vary. We found that on the day there were always some who were unable to attend for various reasons.
- It is helpful to recruit young people from a range of backgrounds, as relevant to a research study – including from a range of countries of origin, ages, time lived in the UK and genders – to ensure diverse perspectives are reflected and shape the design and implementation of the research.
- Recruiting through gatekeepers (that is, networks and organisations in the community) can be beneficial, as they usually have a relationship with the young people and are better placed to gauge genuine interest in taking part. However, care should be taken to brief gatekeepers to not put pressure on young people to participate, and to tell a young person that there will be no negative repercussions on their relationship with gatekeepers or other services should they decline.
- Recruitment takes time, so it is helpful to factor this into the project timeline and start recruitment as early as possible.

Informed consent

Gaining informed consent from EbLE group members, and their parents/carers when needed, was a key ethical consideration. Prior to meeting with the EbLE group, consent was obtained from the parents/carers of young people under the age of 18 by either the gatekeepers or ASPIRE researchers. The research team shared information sheets in English which contained youth-friendly and accessible information about the project, as well as what being a part of the EbLE would entail. On occasion, members of the research team called parents/carers to talk through the information sheet. In some instances, the languages represented within the research team were drawn upon when speaking with parents/carers in their mother tongue, which helped facilitate understanding of some of the more challenging concepts to understand for those new to English.

The consent process with young people started before the first EbLE group meeting, when they were initially approached by the gatekeepers, but remained iterative. Because explaining to a group of young people – some as young as 14 and others at earlier stages of English language acquisition – what ‘research’ is and what their involvement in an EbLE group would look like, we took time in the first session to unpack key concepts and to engage in the informed consent process.

The young people were given the option of providing written or verbal consent. We chose to do this because participants from displaced backgrounds may have had negative interactions with authorities and can be suspicious of written consent forms ([Clark-Kazak, 2017](#)). Some may be worried or apprehensive about signing a consent form and whether such documentation may have an impact on their asylum claim ([Hopkins, 2008](#)). Participants were given the choice to leave the discussion at any time (and some did choose to do so) and knew they could withdraw from the group at any time.

Our lessons learned from informed consent:

- It is important that the language used in the information sheets for young people and parents/carers is simple and easy to understand. It can be helpful to fit all information within a one-page document so that it is easy to distribute and digest.

- Though not always a possibility, offering information sheets in multiple languages or having translation services available when getting consent from parents/carers can be helpful. We found the ability to draw on the languages represented in the research team invaluable.
- It is important that researchers leave ample time for gatekeepers to engage in the consent process with parents/carers (where needed) ahead of interactions with an EbLE group.
- Researchers should allow plenty of in-person time to talk to young people through key information and explain to them key concepts about participatory research: what research is, what their involvement as part of an EbLE group will look like, and why it is important. It is helpful to repeat this each time you meet them so that you are confident that consent is ongoing and iterative.
- It is helpful to give young people the option to provide written or verbal consent. If you sense young people are uncomfortable in signing forms, switch to recording their verbal consent, if your study and ethical approval allows.

Discussions with the EbLE group

Discussions with the EbLE group were held at three critical junctures of ASPIRE: at the inception of the project, to test the research tools before data collection and, finally, to share emerging findings from the research.

EbLE Group Discussion 1

The purpose of the initial group discussion was to explain the research project to the EbLE group and shape the research questions. The group suggested which stakeholders they thought should be targeted through this research, and what questions they should be asked. These discussions also helped to refine terminology: young people suggested appropriate terms that were familiar or culturally relevant to refugee and asylum-seeking young people.

The group discussion began with an ice-breaker, followed by an explanation of what research is and why we were doing this piece of research. The young people were then asked to reflect on their education journeys in the UK. Some young people were not comfortable sharing their experiences in a larger group setting, so we broke into smaller groups to discuss some of the questions which helped all participants feel comfortable and engage in the discussion. Asking young people about their education journeys acted as a springboard for consulting young people about what aspects of these education journeys they thought would be helpful for us to prioritise through the research study, and why.

EbLE Group Discussion 2

The purpose of the second group discussion was to try out the data collection tools that had been developed by ASPIRE researchers, including the focus group discussion questions and creative activities identified, and to further refine them in collaboration with the EbLE group.

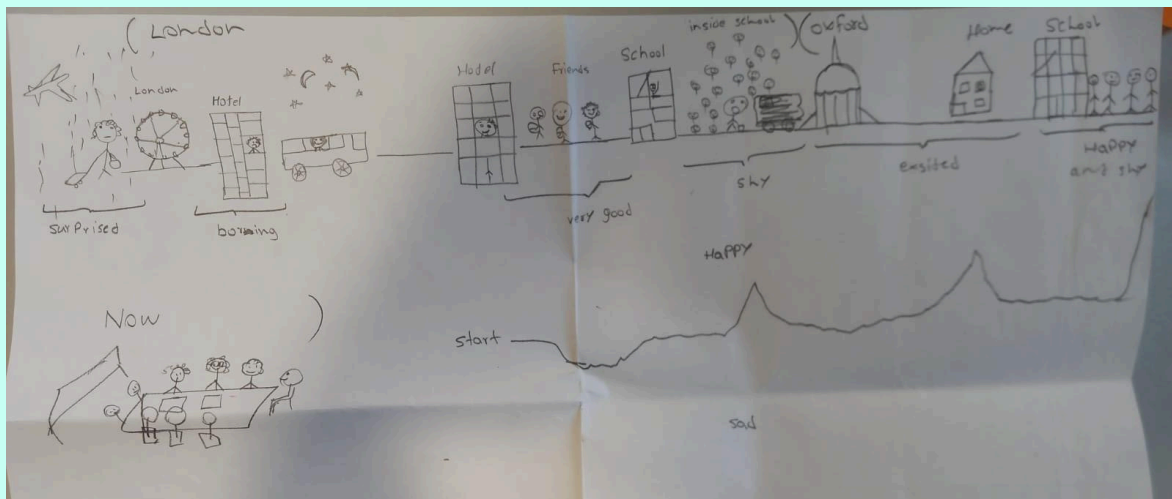
The activities selected for data collection were chosen for their creative and youth-friendly nature in order to facilitate meaningful discussion with research participants. Using creative and arts-based data collection methods in research is recognised as a valuable technique for reducing power dynamics between researchers and participants, and for providing an avenue for young people at earlier stages of English language acquisition to express themselves ([NCVO, n.d.](#)). This discussion with the EbLE group provided the ASPIRE researchers with the opportunity to try out these activities, and further refine them to ensure they were accessible and relevant for the young people who would later participate in data collection.

One of the learnings from this discussion with the EbLE group was that not all participants will want to draw or express themselves creatively. As a result, the research team used activities that allowed the young people to choose the method they would like to use to express themselves – including through drawing, writing or speaking.

The creative activities carried out with the EbLE groups

My education journey

This activity encouraged the young people to draw or map out their educational journey since arriving in the UK. We encouraged the participants to focus on how they felt during different stages of this journey: what made them happy and what made them sad. Further, the young people were encouraged to reflect on which organisations helped them and where they found support when they first arrived. Blank paper and crayons were provided, and they were allowed to be as creative as they wanted to be for this activity. One particularly creative example of this activity is provided below.



Things I like and dislike

This simple activity encouraged the young people to reflect on what they were enjoying and what they were finding hard about education, and sort them into two lists. This activity elicited a range of responses from the young people, and gave helpful insight into their experiences in education.

EbLE Group Discussion 3

The primary purpose of this group discussion was to present to, and gather reflections from, the EbLE group on the findings of the research. ASPIRE researchers presented key findings from the research in a youth-friendly way, and asked the EbLE group whether anything stood out to them or surprised them. This helped researchers to further interpret meaning behind research findings, and to validate them.

The secondary purpose of this group discussion was to collaboratively design a resource for future new arrivals in Nottingham and Oxford, based on findings from the research. The EbLE group were asked about what information would have been helpful for them when they were newly arrived to their cities in terms of knowing what education provision was available in their cities. They were also asked about how this information should be presented and shared with future new arrivals.

Our lessons learned from the discussions with the EbLE group:

- Young people have a lot of valuable information and insights to share at all stages of the research process, and taking the time to consult with them strengthens the research process and its findings.
- At the start, it is important to spend time introducing the concept of research and what participatory research is, in a youth-friendly and accessible way. Do not assume the term research will be familiar to young people, or that young people will understand why they are being consulted on the research design and process. Ensure young people know that their voices matter and will be heard throughout the research process – and make sure they are actually heard and shape the research.
- The location of the meetings is important. We would suggest either choosing a place the young people are familiar with, or, if that is not possible, a welcoming, youth-friendly space. In Oxford, we chose a library where young people already engage in youth-centred activities, and this helped them feel comfortable and at ease. In Nottingham, we chose a cultural venue, and young people told us that they felt important because we were meeting them in a place they thought was monumental for the city.
- It is helpful to offer light refreshments such as crisps, fruit and juice. This keeps young people feeling refreshed, valued and energised, and ultimately encourages better participation.
- Create an environment where all participants feel comfortable to speak. Sometimes, breaking into smaller groups allows the quieter participants to be heard.
- Share information with young people in easy to understand and straightforward English, particularly if they are at earlier stages of English language acquisition.
- The use of creative activities such as drawing and games, can help participants who are more reserved or shy still feel able to express themselves. This can also help young people who are not confident in speaking English contribute to the discussion.
- Having a range of activities and remaining flexible is helpful as not all participants will engage with each activity to the same extent. Some young people chose not to draw, but instead to write or share their experiences verbally. Gender and personality can impact how young people express themselves in these settings.

Compensation for members of the EbLE group

It is important that young people who give their time to participate in research, as research participants or members of EbLE groups, are fairly and appropriately compensated for their time. Young people should feel that their time is valued and not taken for granted. For the ASPIRE project, the members of the EbLE group were reimbursed for their travel and time given to being a part of the project. They were compensated using vouchers.

Our lessons learned from compensating EbLE groups:

- Thanking young people for their time in research is important, and young people valued receiving vouchers. It is important that budgets include appropriate compensation for EbLE groups. Consulting with gatekeepers about how much is an appropriate amount can be helpful in deciding the value of vouchers. For this study, we provided a £20 voucher per hour engaged in the EbLE group.
- In the case of digital vouchers, it is helpful to share instructions on how to claim the voucher with the young person at the end of the interview. Sometimes, it is more appropriate to distribute physical vouchers if digital literacy or access barriers exist. It is helpful to discuss voucher distribution with gatekeepers ahead of time, so that you are able to distribute them in an appropriate and accessible manner.

Conclusion

This reflective document demonstrates some of the methods employed to facilitate a participatory, youth-centred approach in the ASPIRE research project. Our experience is that engaging young people as co-producers in research that directly impacts their lives leads to meaningful participation and enables contextualised and relevant outputs. We hope that the lessons learned and reflections included in this document will be useful for those seeking more creative and significant engagement of young people in research.

To learn more about the ASPIRE research and to read the various outputs from the project, please visit: www.reuk.org/aspire.

About the research partners

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

Joanna McIntyre is Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham's School of Education. Jo joined the School in 2010 after a number of years teaching English in secondary schools. Jo previously held the roles of Deputy Head of School, Associate Head of School, and Director of Initial Teacher Education. Jo is particularly interested in how, through the field of Education, we can understand and improve the lives of those who are marginalised or disadvantaged by society Jo has worked on a range of funded research projects and her current work is located in the fields of teacher education and refugee education. Jo's work in the field of refugee education explores the barriers and opportunities schools face when working to support refugee children. Jo recent research projects include an exploration of the role of arts in fostering a sense of belonging for newly arrived young people in cities in Europe, a project with Swedish educators looking at implementation of an inclusive model of education for refugee pupils, and a series of research collaborations with Refugee Education UK, Jo leads the Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE). She is also an Honorary Research Fellow at the Department of Education, University of Oxford, and a patron for Initiatives of Change (IofC)'s Refugees as Re-Builders.

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