JOURNAL ON EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

REFERENCES:

The *Journal on Education in Emergencies (JEiE)* publishes groundbreaking and outstanding scholarly and practitioner work on education in emergencies (EiE), defined broadly as quality learning opportunities for all ages in situations of crisis, including early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal, technical, vocation, higher and adult education.

VOICES OF REFUGEE YOUTH: REFLECTIONS ON A PARTICIPATORY, YOUTH-CENTERED STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Involving young refugees in the research process has significant potential to address current gaps in refugee research in a rigorous, equitable, and empowering way (Clark 2004; Haile, Meloni, and Rezaie 2020). This field note is a report on Voices of Refugee Youth, a research initiative in Pakistan and Rwanda that aims to build the evidence base for postprimary refugee education, while also increasing young refugees' access to and representation in this field of research. The purpose of this field note is to reflect critically on the participatory approach adopted by the initiative, whereby young refugees work as coresearchers who advise, collect data, and contribute to the deliverables. In the note we highlight the benefits of this approach, but also problematize it to offer valuable lessons about involving young refugees meaningfully in the research process. We conclude that participation must be approached with flexibility in order to facilitate different levels of participation, based on the skills or knowledge level of the young refugees in question. It is critical that participation is accompanied by rigorous training that responds to participants' contexts and experience levels and addresses ethical issues, such as positionality-based bias.

INTRODUCTION

In this field note, we use the case of Voices of Refugee Youth, an ongoing research initiative in Pakistan and Rwanda, to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of involving refugee community members as active decisionmakers in the research process.[1]

The initiative has the dual aims of building evidence for postprimary refugee education and of increasing young refugees' access to and representation in this field of research. The former is being achieved through a longitudinal panel study of 1,126 refugee students in secondary and higher education. The latter is being achieved through the involvement of 31 youth researchers who work as core contributors to the research process, while concurrently receiving training in applied research that will enable them to earn a graduate-level accreditation.

The aim of this field note is to contribute to refugee education and to education in emergencies (EiE) research by outlining the participatory principles upon which the research initiative was designed, and then to reflect critically on the effectiveness of the approach adopted. We posit that a flexible approach to participation, which is designed around the young refugees' existing knowledge and supported by rigorous training, can enhance the relevance of the methodology and the quality of the findings. The field note is coauthored by four refugee youth researchers, whose involvement has increased refugee access to a historically inaccessible academic space while simultaneously enriching that space.

We focus in this field note exclusively on the approach taken; the findings from the longitudinal study itself will be documented in a future publication.

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN CONTEXT: PRINCIPLES, BENEFITS, AND CHALLENGES

Youth have long been left out of conversations about the issues that involve them (Clark 2004; Women's Refugee Commission 2022). This has been increasingly recognized in declarations such as the Transforming Education Summit's 2022 Youth Declaration (UN 2022), which advocates for the meaningful engagement of young people in education policy and decisionmaking. Participatory research approaches are one valuable way to ensure that youth voices inform the research

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1   The research is funded by Dubai Cares. It is run in a partnership between Jigsaw, Refugee Education UK, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

that affects young people. These diverse approaches are all underpinned by the core principles of democratic decisionmaking, the inclusion and amplification of marginalized voices, and opportunities for mutual learning among the participants (Duarte et al. 2018). In practice, participation may involve research stakeholders who set the research agenda, act as consultants, or conduct research alongside the researchers (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2015; Haile, Meloni, and Rezaie 2020).

Using participatory methods in education research that concerns both youth and refugees has a number of instrumental and ethical benefits. Participatory approaches have been found to help build trusting relationships that ultimately lead to higher quality research. Youth-centered approaches, for example, can result in more robust and honest responses during data collection, as the respondents may prefer to discuss sensitive issues with their peers (Clark 2004; Haile et al. 2020). As insiders, youth researchers may offer new insights into which questions will be most relevant to their peers and identify context-based issues that other researchers may miss (Kirby 2004). However, this level of involvement is not without risks. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) suggest that "insider" researchers are inevitably and inherently biased and that they make assumptions about their research subjects; this can, however, be somewhat countered by increased awareness of that bias. Haile et al. (2020) highlight that, from an ethical perspective, community researchers may be vulnerable to conflicted loyalty between their research team and their community.

Conversely, participatory approaches may help to ensure that research is ethically sound and that it benefits the participants. Participation can be particularly important when working with vulnerable groups, as it can help prevent using damaging "helicopter research" practices (Haelewaters, Hofmann, and Romero-Olivares 2021). It also can improve the accessibility and usefulness of research findings for the communities with whom the research was conducted (Clark 2004) and ensure that the participants' contributions are recognized (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2015).

These instrumental and ethical benefits are strongly aligned with the mandate of Voices of Refugee Youth. From its inception, the UK-based research team deemed it essential that refugee youth be involved in decisionmaking, given ongoing concerns that the attitudes and preferences of local actors in EiE settings continue to be overlooked (Foulds et al. 2021). In light of this, and echoing Abu-Amsha et al. (2019), the ultimate aim of the UK-based team was to enable those who have been displaced by conflict to shape the education they and their communities need to rebuild their lives.

The UK-based team also wanted to ensure that the voices of young people were heard, given the significant number of refugee children and youth in Pakistan and Rwanda. There are reportedly 1.35 million registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan, more than half (51.3%) of whom are ages 0-17 (UNHCR 2022). In Rwanda, these figures stand at approximately 127,000 Burundian and Congolese refugees, 49 percent of whom are children (UNHCR 2021). These youth-heavy populations highlight the need for increased youth representation in refugee education research.

In order to define the scope of refugee youth participation in Voices of Refugee Youth, the UK-based team drew from the Ladder of Participation (see Figure 1), which is a model used to define participation levels for projects that involve children and youth. Developed for the UN Children's Fund by Roger Hart in 1992 (and adapted by the authors), the ladder presents eight "rungs" of participation, each describing the characteristics associated with different levels of decisionmaking agency, control, and power:

Figure 1: The Ladder of Participation

8. Youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults

7. Youth-initiated and directed

6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth

5. Consulted and informed

4. Assigned but informed

Degrees of participation

3. Tokenism

2. Decoration

1. Manipulation

Nonparticipation

Source: Adapted from Hart (1992, 8)

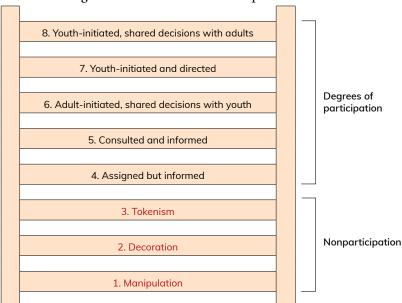Significantly, Hart also warns against making maximum participation an uninterrogated goal in itself: "It is not necessary that children always operate on the highest possible rungs of the ladder…programmes should be designed which maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability" (1992, 11). The design of Voices of Refugee Youth, therefore, was

based on the understanding that each activity in the research process may offer different opportunities for refugee youth participation, and different limitations.

APPLYING PARTICIPATORY PRINCIPLES: CREATING AND FACILITATING THE YOUTH RESEARCHERS' ROLE

Two cohorts of refugee youth were recruited for Voices of Refugee Youth: 15 in Pakistan (nine male, six female) and 16 in Rwanda (ten male, six female). In this section, we detail three crucial elements that facilitated their participation: recruitment, remuneration, and training. We then summarize the role the youth researchers played in the participatory design.

Recruitment

To recruit youth researchers, a terms of reference was sent to all refugee higher education students in Pakistan and Rwanda with whom the UN High Commissioner for Refugees had contact as registered recipients of refugee scholarships. The terms of reference detailed the purpose of the initiative, the anticipated activities and responsibilities, the eligibility criteria, and the required skills in order to ensure that the applicants were fully informed (Kirby 2004). The applicants had to have refugee status, be less than 30 years old, and be studying at the university level or have recently graduated. Those who were shortlisted were invited to attend an interactive, in-person training week, during which the candidates participated in modules covering the research cycle, designs and methodologies, data-collection tools, and research ethics. Candidates underwent a series of observations and interviews during this training week, after which the final participants were selected. This approach was taken to ensure that those who were selected had a solid grounding in research principles. This process was key to helping those selected to develop the research skills they would need to participate, and also rewarded the unsuccessful candidates, who had dedicated time to the recruitment process, by giving them valuable learning opportunities.

Remuneration

In line with Bradbury-Jones and Taylor's (2015) recommendation that remuneration be "country, culture and context sensitive" (164), fair rates of pay were discussed with the young refugees during the consultation visit, and again before the final decisions were made about which activities to remunerate youth researchers for, and what the amount should be. A number of different payments were made

throughout the project, and the youth researchers always agreed to the rates in advance. The payments were made for attending training (including compensation for missing work at other jobs), for days worked during data collection, and for communication and transportation expenses.

Training

An accredited training program was delivered via a combination of in-person and online sessions at different points during the study.[2] Each unit corresponded with a stage of the research cycle (design, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination) and consisted of practical tasks relevant to the youth researchers' assigned activities. Their knowledge and skills were assessed at the end of each unit, and those who met the criteria earned an internationally accredited qualification in applied research. Training was deemed essential to ensure that the participants could fulfill their roles at the different stages without feeling overwhelmed (Hart 1992). Moreover, as an education program in itself, the training made a valuable contribution to the EiE sphere by equipping conflict-displaced refugees with the skills to secure future employment opportunities.

Youth Researchers' Role

While the aim was for the youth researchers to participate in every stage of the research process, it was anticipated that their level of participation would vary at each stage, depending on their knowledge, skills, and interests. Nonetheless, the intention was for the scope of the youth researcher role to remain within what Hart (1992) identifies as Levels 4 to 6 on the Ladder of Participation. At every stage, the youth researchers were in constant contact with the UK-based team, to whom they reported their progress. They were encouraged to raise concerns and ask for support when needed.

The research study tracked a cohort of 1,126 young refugees engaged in postprimary education in Pakistan and Rwanda at three data points over a three-year period. The youth researchers were tasked with a consultative role in the tool design stage. They provided feedback on the quantitative and qualitative tools drafted by the UK-based team, including a longitudinal panel survey, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. These tools were designed to explore the factors that were influencing the refugees' education experiences, how education has affected

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2   The course is accredited by John Carroll University, which is itself accredited by the Higher Learning Commission—a national accreditation agency of the United States.

their lives and aspirations, and how they think various education actors could improve refugees' education and employment prospects.

The youth researchers were given a more autonomous role in the data-collection stage. They were tasked with identifying research participants in keeping with the sampling criteria developed by the UK-based team. The youth researchers also took responsibility for administering all the surveys and for organizing and facilitating focus groups and interviews in Pakistan and Rwanda.

In the latter stages of the research process, the youth researchers returned to a consultative level of participation. They offered context-based interpretations of the data at the analysis stage, and made both written and spoken contributions to the research deliverables.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

In this section, we explore the effectiveness of the participatory approach adopted for Voices of Refugee Youth. We detail the level of participation achieved at each stage of the research cycle, then critically reflect on the benefits, limitations, and key sector learnings resulting from these experiences.

The Design Phase

From the inception of Voices of Refugee Youth, the UK-based team was aware that, while seeking to place refugees from low- and middle-income countries at its center, the initiative was nonetheless driven by funding, research experience, and motivation from high-income contexts. There is an inherent risk that research conceived outside of the implementation context will not reflect the realities and needs of those within that context (Haelewaters et al. 2021).

The young refugees' consultative role (Level 5 in Hart's model) during the consultation stage of the research design provided an important opportunity for them to shape the research according to what they felt would be most feasible and which education issues they felt were important to address. These refugees' educational experiences were used as a foundation on which to develop the research questions, while questions around the training structure and content, how to align activities with typical availability, what the study's geographic focus should be, and their views on reasonable remuneration shaped the research design.

This input ensured that the initiative was both useful for the refugee community (Clark 2004) and accessible to the youth researchers.

The youth researchers' consultative role during the design of the data-collection tools enhanced the quality of the tools, as they drew from their valuable contextual knowledge to suggest which questions might yield the most useful data. For example, they recommended that the interviews in Pakistan include questions about the recent switch from the Afghan to the Pakistani curriculum. This resulted in a rich addition to the qualitative data and provided a foundation on which to develop contextually specific policy recommendations.

The Data-Collection Phase

Youth researchers played a central role in the data-collection activities. Although the task was essentially prescribed (Level 4 on Hart's ladder), the youth researchers were able to make important decisions during this process (Level 6), such as when and where to collect the data, and whom the participants should be (provided that the sampling criteria were applied). They worked collaboratively and independently, troubleshooting issues as required and drawing from their training to decide what contextually relevant, probing questions to ask in each interview. The extensive focus on research ethics during the training ensured that the wellbeing of the youth researchers and their participants was safeguarded throughout the process (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2015).

With this level of autonomy, the youth researchers were able to use their context, age, and language knowledge to establish trust with the participants. According to the researchers, the participants identified with them as community members, which enabled the participants to feel more relaxed, and therefore perhaps be more open, than they might have been with figures from outside the community (Kirby 2004). This was particularly notable in Pakistan, where female youth researchers remarked on the how the combination of their gender, age, and community status enabled them to create safe spaces in which their female refugee peers could be interviewed.

As previously noted, there was a risk that the youth researchers' findings would be skewed by assumptions they made based on pre-existing knowledge of their own community, rather than on what they discovered using the research methods. For example, they may have inadvertently asked leading questions based on their experience, or emphasized certain parts of respondents' answers in their note-taking based on what resonated most with them. However, the emphasis during

the training program on adopting a critical mindset and constantly reflecting on questions of positionality helped to mitigate this risk. The youth researchers reported that the training prompted them to gather participants' experiences objectively before applying their own perspective.

The dual role of researcher and community member occasionally challenged the youth researchers' professional agency during the research process. This was a particular concern for the female youth researchers in Pakistan, who reported being pressured by school principals to conduct interviews when teachers or other students were present, which reportedly made the participants uncomfortable and unwilling to answer questions fully. Navigating hierarchies and power dynamics remains a key challenge to youth-led data-collection approaches (Kirby 2004). Organizations that implement a participatory approach must be prepared to provide appropriate support, such as formal documentation of the research permissions, so that youth researchers can assert their authority confidently.

Finally, the youth-led data-collection approach yielded linguistic benefits. As members of their participants' linguistic communities and being proficient English speakers, the youth researchers were able to translate data-collection instruments and conduct the data collection in the participants' preferred languages. However, the youth researchers' lack of formal translation experience may mean that some details were lost in translation (van Nes et al. 2010). In addition, their proficiency in written English varied, which resulted in some of the English transcripts being of poorer quality. These limitations may be mitigated by ensuring that the research team has the linguistic capacity to assess the quality of the translations of tools and transcripts, and to rigorously assess applicants' spoken and written English proficiency during recruitment.

The Data-Analysis Phase

The youth researchers' participation was arguably most limited during the data analysis. The UK-based team did most of the work in this area, and the youth researchers contributed their contextual knowledge toward the end (Level 5 on Hart's ladder). For example, the data revealed some significant differences in the survey responses from Burundian and Congolese participants regarding their educational aspirations. Members of the Rwanda-based cohort, a mixture of Burundian and Congolese nationals, were able to use their knowledge of these communities to suggest why the different groups might have had differing opinions.

This division of responsibility between the UK-based and the youth researchers was determined by two practical limitations. First was the infeasibility of sharing analysis among more than 30 researchers, and second was the fact that, although the analysis methods were covered in the training, observations conducted during the training suggested that the youth researchers would need significantly more practice to be able to analyze participant data to the standard required. Organizations seeking to involve youth researchers to any extent in analysis activities should, therefore, factor in significant time and money to deliver a sustained period of training in data analysis.

The Dissemination Phase

The youth researchers had no role in making decisions about how to disseminate findings, as the deliverables were agreed to with the donor prior to the youth researchers becoming involved. The youth researchers' involvement in the development of the agreed-to deliverables varied from being consulted for input (as in this field note; Level 5 on Hart's ladder) to making decisions about the core content (as in the forthcoming youth advocacy reports; Level 6).

The coauthorship of written deliverables highlighted some key issues about youth researcher participation. In some instances, the youth researchers wrote independent contributions, which were then submitted to the UK-based team for amalgamation. However, this approach resulted in the UK-based researchers having to make significant edits to conform with the level of linguistic formality, structure, and analytical depth expected in research reports. This raised questions about how to edit written contributions without compromising the authenticity of the original voices—especially when the youth researchers did not write in their first language.

This example highlights the importance of assessing the appropriate modality for youth researchers' participation in disseminating findings, including the benefits of spoken authorship. During the training program and the drafting of deliverables, the youth researchers displayed strong analytical skills, but accessing these skills often required verbal prompting—just as teachers ask their students questions to prompt greater consideration of a topic under study (Vogler 2005). Moreover, the majority of the cohort were able to express themselves more fully in spoken English than in the written form. Using some form of coauthorship, such as holding collaborative sessions in which decisions can be made in discussion with others, can enable youth researchers to express themselves freely, unencumbered by concerns about their written English proficiency. This example also illuminates the ethical implications of imposing the educational and academic standards of high-income contexts on

those who not only have not been educated in these systems but who have often also missed significant periods of their own education due to displacement.

CONCLUSION

Voices of Refugee Youth has shown that, when the level of participation is flexible, youth participation in research can have a number of benefits. Consultative participation facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the research context, while ensuring that the findings are relevant and useful to the participants. When refugee youth have access to higher levels of decisionmaking in activities such as data collection, they are able to use their "insider" status to increase participants' trust, thereby strengthening the quality and equity of the findings. Challenges, including possible positionality-based bias and insufficient skills, can be addressed by ensuring that training is based on a clear understanding of the youth researchers' context and prior knowledge, and that it includes constant opportunities for reflection on the complexities of the researcher-community member role. In parallel, research organizations that are considering adopting a participatory approach must ensure that refugee researchers are not made to feel that they are representing all refugees, speaking on behalf of all refugees, or becoming experts on all refugee issues.

The benefits of the participatory approach were also felt by the youth researchers themselves. They reported that the practical training dramatically enhanced their research knowledge and skills, which they felt will enable them to participate in future research and increase their employability more generally. These skills, in combination with a greater understanding of the education issues experienced in their own communities, also will enable them to confidently drive future education advocacy for their communities.

Voices of Refugee Youth has sought to maximize the opportunity of engaging with youth as researchers. In this field note, we have articulated how pre-existing power structures may impede this engagement, especially during data-collection and dissemination activities. However, we hope that, in addition to increasing knowledge of effective participatory approaches in refugee research, this field note will lead those in positions of power to consider how they might adapt their conventional ways of operating to include refugee voices. With a little thoughtful facilitation, these voices stand to enrich existing knowledge spaces and ultimately to make a vital contribution to our understanding of postprimary refugee education issues.

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