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**Gaywood, Donna ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4169-3638>, Bertram, Tony and Pascal, Chris (2020) Involving refugee children in research: emerging ethical and positioning issues. European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 28 (1). pp. 149-162. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2020.1707369**

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2020.1707369>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2020.1707369>  
EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/11646>

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## **Involving refugee children in research: emerging ethical and positioning issues.**

**Donna Gaywood, Tony Bertram, Chris Pascal.**

### **Abstract:**

*This paper discusses some of the ethical issues encountered when involving refugee children in research. It draws on a study which aims to investigate how very young Syrian refugee children experience Early Education, in one English local authority. This small-scale qualitative piece of research was developed in response to the deepening refugee crisis outlined by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in August 2013 which suggested that as a result of the conflict in Syria, 740,000 refugees were under the age of 11 (UNHCR 2010). The study involves four children and their families- who have been resettled in England as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement scheme (2017). Also involved are four Early Childhood and Education Care settings. The research field is complex and the “customised methods and methodologies” (Halilovich 2013,136) which have been adopted, to respond well to the challenges of the field, are described. Ethical issues concerning the conceptualisation of refugees, a narrative of trauma and location of positionality are expanded. The researcher has developed power sensitive ethical research practices to help manage issues of positionality; negotiate access in the field; develop authentic relationships; address issues of cultural bias in self and others and navigate the challenges of researching with very young refugee children.*

**Keywords:** *conceptualisation, positionality, refugee children, Early Education.*

### **Introduction**

This article examines the emerging ethical and positioning issues of including refugee children in research. It draws on the small scale, qualitative study of a current PhD student who is based in England and is an advisory teacher practitioner researcher. The participants of the study arrived in the United Kingdom with refugee status intact, as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons resettlement scheme (HM Government 2015, 2017). The main actors are four children, three boys and one girl, aged between three and five, all of whom attended Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings during the fieldwork phase of the study. The research is an attempt to capture the lived experiences of these children in their ECEC settings between January - August 2018.

The intention in this article is to first describe the context, next explain the complex theoretical frame and location of the study, then set out the aims, methodology and methods used. Finally, an analysis will be made of the ethical and positioning challenges encountered.

## Context of the study

Sigona (2014) suggests that to properly represent the voice of refugees, it is necessary to place them within a clear political context, and this research was conceived in recent years as a personal and professional response to national and international political events that caused consternation. In August 2013 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published figures which suggested that because of the conflict in Syria, there were one million refugees under the age of 18 and 740,000 were under the age of 11 worldwide (UNHCR 2010). Following political pressure, the British government responded by launching the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme (HM Government 2015) with a commitment to resettle "*up to 20,000 Syrian refugees*" in five years (2015).

Within the local authority where the researcher works as an Early Educator, there were five Syrian families who had arrived as part of the national resettlement scheme and two further Syrian refugee families re-located from a neighbouring, more rural county. Following a presentation with an interpreter, at a bi-annual gathering for the families, four families who met the study criteria set out below agreed to be part of the research.

### Selective sampling of participants

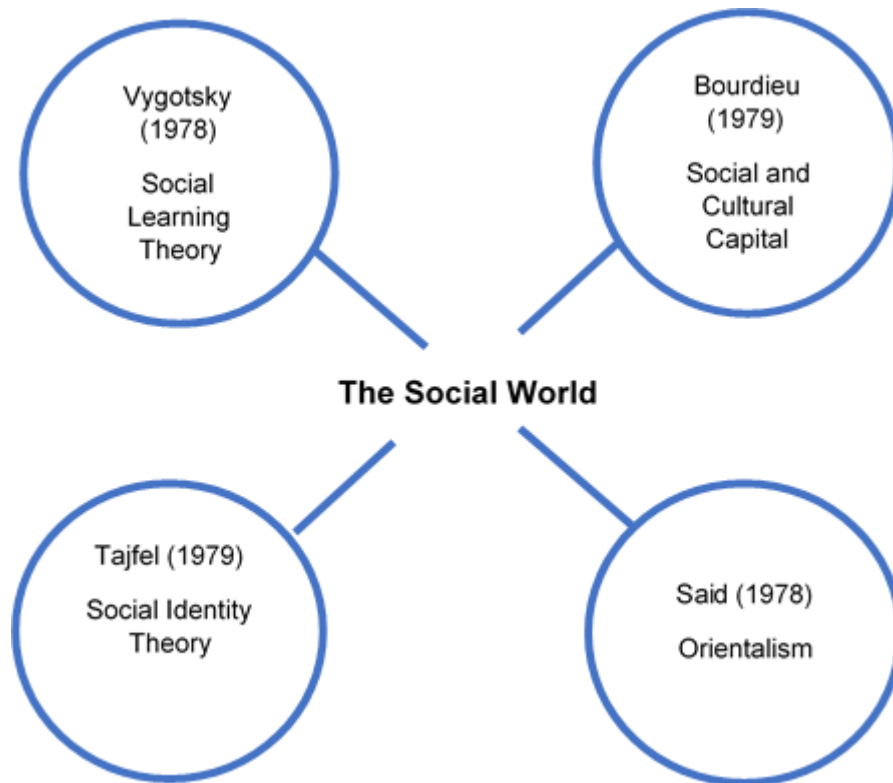


All the study's participant children are Syrian and live within a predominantly white British community with large areas of rurality. Pseudonyms will be used throughout this paper to ensure anonymity. There are three boys and one girl. Two of the boys, Ahmed and Hassan, and the girl, Amira, were in ECEC settings and were aged between three and four during phase one of the fieldwork. They were preparing to go to primary school in September 2018. The other boy, Karam, was in his reception year in school. All the children knew each other, to a greater or lesser extent. Karam and Ahmed were cousins. Karam's father had died before the family came to England. Amira had an older brother who was deaf. Ahmed was also deaf but had been fitted with cochlear implants. Hassan was selective mute. The children's ECEC settings were contacted and agreed to participate. They included a committee run church pre-school for children from two- to-four years old; a local authority nursery for two-to-four year olds, the majority from low income backgrounds; a school nursery with children three to four years old, and the reception class in an infant school for four and five year-olds.

### **Complex theoretical frame**

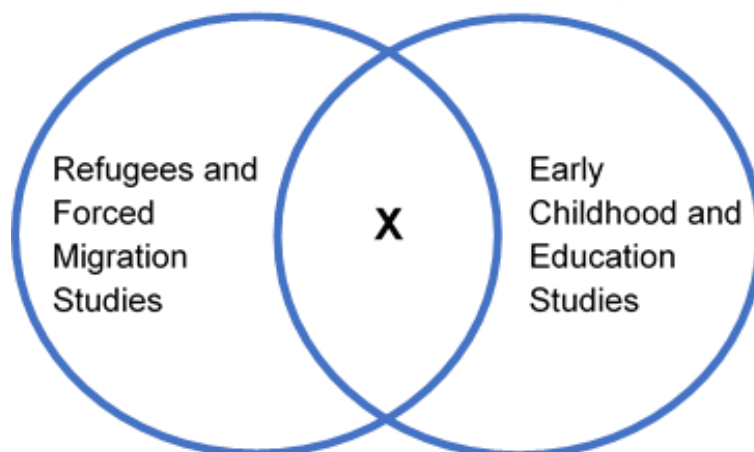
The theoretical frame that has been used is complex and emerged both through the examination of literature and through being in the field. This study is set within the social world of the children and therefore all the theories which feature in the theoretical frame are concerned with relationships within a social context. It has been necessary to include four theories to fully capture and frame the very young refugee children's experiences, which are multi layered and multi-faceted. Each theory offers a different function and no one theory seemed to suffice. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner: 1979) provides a helpful narrative, regarding membership of the "in" or "out" group, using the definitions of "us" and "them" During the first phase of the fieldwork, these notions were easily identified and were noticeably in operation within the interactions amongst the ECECs. Vygotsky (1978) outlines the role of the "*More Knowledgeable Other*" which is an important concept when considering how refugee children negotiate relationships as the newcomers in an established group. The ideas of Said (1978) offers a discourse which has been helpful to make sense of representations of the children and their families and has also enabled the researcher to critique her own perceptions and possible prejudices. Finally, Bourdieu's theory about social and cultural capital (1979) supports an understanding of the dynamics in a social context without replicating a narrative of helplessness but acknowledges issues of power and influence.

### Complex quadratic theoretical lens



The study is located within the intersection between two existing fields of study; namely Early Childhood and Education studies and Refugees and Forced Migration studies.

### Location of Study



By the nature of their experiences, refugees find themselves living between two worlds: their old life and the potential of a new one. Attending an educational setting is often a child's first experience of having to navigate the space between two cultures (Tobin 2016, 9). There is an intersectional aspect to their experience and therefore it is highly appropriate for this study, which chooses to recognise the children's refugee status and their experiences within an ECEC setting, to be located within the intersection between two fields of study.

## **Aims**

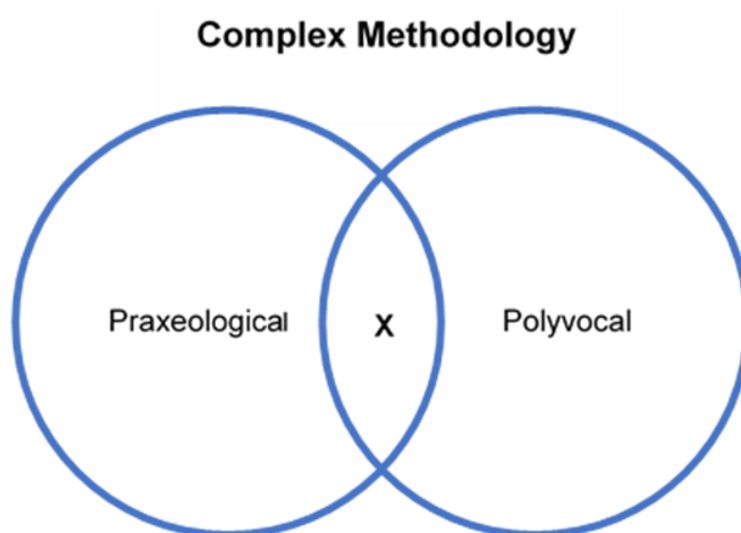
The aims of the overall study are varied and include capturing the refugee child's voice, increasing understanding of the young refugee experience, informing early education practice and pedagogy, and documenting the research challenges. However, this paper will primarily focus on the ethical aspects encountered. Primarily the study is an attempt to hear four young refugee children's voices and by doing so, capture their lived experiences, as they navigate daily life in ECEC settings within one local authority in England. The research adheres to the EECERA code of ethics.

Through capturing the refugee children's lived experiences in ECEC settings, the study aims to increase understanding about their lives.

As a practitioner researcher, a further aim is to use the findings to inform the everyday educational response and pedagogical practice in ECEC settings, specifically for refugee children and their families, with the intention of using insights gained, to develop a pedagogy of welcome. Finally, the research aims to document the significant research challenges encountered in order to better inform future researchers working in a similar field.

## **Methodology and Methods**

The methodology for this study has emerged slowly during the process of recruiting participants and through the first phase of field work. This has proved to be complex and required a hybrid methodology to serve its purpose.



Like the location of study, the methodology sits within an intersection. Tobin (2016) recognised the multiple narratives within research and developed a polyvocal methodology to take these into account. This approach has therefore been employed to enable the researcher to capture the many voices which inform each child’s narrative.

#### **Voices for one child’s story**

Refugee child
Child’s Parents
Child’s keyperson
Child’s siblings
Early Years Professionals in each setting
Researcher’s voice
Mediated through the interpreter

One of the aims of the study is to inform everyday educational practice. A praxeological methodology (Formosinho and Formosinho 2012; Pascal and Bertram 2012) has also been employed to ensure praxis is central, in line with one of the aims of the piece: to inform educational practice and pedagogy. The inquiry is strongly praxeological within an educational context, with acknowledged actors, and is, “*supported by a belief system and an ethical code, conveying emotions and feelings*” (Formosinho and Formosinho 2012, 601).

The research takes place in the social world and is characterised by relationships, is “*attached*” by nature and the researcher is perceived as “*the main instrument of research*” (2012, 602). The role of power has been clearly recognised from the outset with the emancipatory nature of

the research within the field of Refugees and Forced Migration studies and the influence of Freire (1970) in the purpose of study. However, both methodologies support the ethical requirements and commitments of the study. Tobin (2016) not only influenced the methodological approach for this study, but also the structure. In his work, the research teams filmed im/migrant children in ECEC settings in five countries. However, because of the refugee status of the children in this study, there was a high potential for traumatised behaviour (Measham et al 2014, 209) so it was felt that filming could be unethical. A different method was needed to record each child's everyday lived experiences in their ECEC settings.

An alternative, perhaps more ethical, approach was developed by Theron et al (2011) who used a drawing methodology whilst researching with child victims following the Rwandan genocide. Other studies have used drawing methods to capture vulnerable children's perspectives of their daily lives (Liamputtong and Fernandes 2015; Maagerø and Sunde 2016; Wahle et al 2017). The rationale to incorporate a drawing methodology includes: the cross-cultural aspect of drawing; its immediacy; easily accessible tools; the transcendence of language barriers, and the ability to express potentially difficult concepts or ideas without words. Multimodal methods were employed to capture the children's voices and tell their story in the first layer of field work, instead of using film. These included: structured child observations (Carr et al 2002) using competencies from the Accounting Early for Lifelong Learning Programme (Bertram et al 2008); audio recorded interviews with each child's keyperson (Elfer et al 2003); photographs taken by the children of what was important to them in their ECEC setting (Clark and Moss 2011); and child and parental drawings made in response to set questions about their experiences. All these artefacts were collated, and four visual vignettes in PowerPoint were created with a graphic artist to represent each child's story. Like a piece of film footage, the visual vignettes needed to undergo an editing process, in order to adequately represent each child's experience. Therefore, "*a common set of concerns and guidelines*" (Tobin 2016, 34) were adopted to select what was included in each vignette. Each piece of data was checked to ensure it represented the child's experience in the ECEC setting and a lengthy discussion was had with the artist to ensure that the concepts and experiences could be adequately portrayed visually. The artist made drawings of each child based on the researcher's knowledge of them, in an attempt to capture their personalities and situation. These representations aided the flow of the child's story. Once the lived experience of each child was made into a personalised narrative visual vignette, it was presented to the children, their siblings and parents, for member checking (Lincoln and Guba 1985). It was then shown to the Early Educators in each ECEC to



provoke further professional discussion and reflection. The presentation of the vignettes constituted the second fieldwork phase between February-June 2019.

## **Discussion**

The researcher encountered two significant challenges when including very young refugee children in research. These were the conceptualisation of refugees and issues of researcher's positionality, with particular reference to being an advocate researcher and the insider-outsider dichotomy she encountered.

### **Conceptualisation of refugees**

The 1951 United Nation definition (UNHCR Refugee Agency 2010, 14) is the generally accepted norm when referring to refugees. However, the conceptualising of a "refugee" and, for this study, a "refugee child" is important. Hart (2014) outlines the trends of conceptualization within the Refugee and Forced Migration study field. Refugee children have been perceived as inherently vulnerable, traumatised, needing healing and, more recently, innately resilient. (2014, 386).

### **The dominant narrative of trauma**

There is a paucity of research which is concerned solely with the everyday lived experiences of very young refugee children. The literature tends to focus on the traumatic element of their experiences. Fazel et al (2012) offer a full and comprehensive review of literature about the mental health of refugee children who settle in high-income countries. They identify risk and protective factors (2012, 277). Hart (2009) presents an educational psychologist's view, also identifying factors which can increase and decrease a child's risk of developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (2009, 354/5) Measham (2014) goes further to describe more atypical symptoms of trauma that young refugee children may experience (2014, 209).

In terms of the research participants in this study, arriving as part of the Syrian Refugee Resettlement programme has meant the nuclear family has remained intact, their refugee status was granted without any uncertainty, and secure housing and financial assistance was provided. They were given support workers to help navigate a new system and enabled to work where possible. There was an expectation that the adults should attend language classes. Following their arrival, the families have remained in close contact with each other, forming a community, which seems to offer an ongoing sense of belonging. So, although there is some indication of trauma and poor mental health within the participant families, there is also evidence of remediating factors. However, ongoing observations of my colleagues and others within the

local authority, suggests the narrative of trauma is enduring and persistent. Whilst not wishing to diminish or underestimate any trauma experienced by refugee children in the pre- and peri-migration events, this study is about those who have survived and are making their way in a new place, despite the difficulties.

### **The influence of Orientalism**

Said (1978) writes about the process of Orientalisation, where people from the East are perceived as different and are exoticised. This is particularly pertinent for this study as the children are all Syrian. Conceptualising refugee children as the vulnerable exotic other, is not only reductionist but has the potential to create unequal power relationships within the research process.

Where refugees are essentialised, their lives can be reduced to one common experience and they are homogenised being referred to en masse as “refugees.” Almost as a direct consequence of this essentialisation and exoticisation of refugees there can be a subtle narrative where the receiving country becomes self-congratulatory. So, whilst it is true that Britain offered refuge to Syrian families, there is a subtle positioning of taking on the role of saviour.

Although the impact of this over simplified conceptualisation on the participants in this study is unclear, there seemed to be tension between the refugee parents and the ECEC settings. This appeared to cause unease for the participants and an ethical complexity for the researcher. Staff at all of the participant settings reported difficulty in communicating with the parents because of the language barrier and one staff member reported that she found the parents cold and was keen to know whether they were “*grateful*” to the staff team (Fieldnotes: Practitioner discussion after viewing vignette: 8.4.19).

This complexity seemed also to be felt by the parents. One of the mothers described a staff member as having a “*yellow smile*” (Fieldnotes: Parent Interview: 29.6.18), an Arabic phrase which describes a person who smiles with their mouth, but not their eyes; a false smile. One of the fathers also outlined conflicting feelings about the ECEC setting.

*“When I asked again, how M found the school (generic term) he said that he always felt like a complete idiot, very dumb because he was surrounded by very educated people. He said that he understood the people were very kind to him but he still felt very stupid.”* (Fieldnotes: Parent interview 14.5.18)

This tension presented a significant challenge for the researcher, when including refugee children in research, particularly in her role as practitioner researcher. She often experienced divided loyalties between the refugee children, their parents and her ECEC colleagues.

Given the researcher's inner tensions, the issues with conceptualisation of refugees, their pre-, peri- and post-migration experiences and the host country positioning, it has been vital to the ethical integrity of this study to have clarity about the researcher's positionality.

### **Positionality**

Many researchers working with young children are mindful of issues relating to consent and ongoing assent (Dockett and Perry 2010; Phelan and Kinsella 2013). Equally in this study, matters of culture are an ongoing concern because of its context and location. The local authority within which the refugee children have been settled is largely affluent, with hidden pockets of poverty. Most residents are White British and there is limited experience of different cultures. All the educators interviewed were White British and there was little acknowledgement of cultural issues.

Im and Swadener (2016) also encountered cultural sensitivities and offer an important point of note regarding awareness of cultural differences and the impact on the research process and outcomes. For example, a lack of cultural awareness on the part of the researcher created a significant moment of tension for one family in the second phase of the fieldwork.

*“During the first showing, an argument erupted between the parents. It was about the flag in the final picture of the visual vignette. It was very difficult. It turns out that the Syrian flag is very contested and is very sensitive. The mum was the first to point out that this was not the flag of Syria, that there were only two stars and there was not green at the top. Mum and Dad then had a very heated argument. Dad then explained that the flag which was used was the new pro-democracy flag.” (Reflective Journal: 24.2.19)*

Within this context, locating the positionality of the researcher is vital to ensure consistency within the ethical approach, add rigour to the research itself (Formosinho and Formosinho 2012, 596/7) and enable the researcher to remain overtly conscious of a possible exclusive narrative (Krumer-Nevo and Sivo 2012). This has been complex.

Originally, an intentional positional choice was made when creating and using a hybrid methodology. To be a praxeological researcher necessitates a relational, attached and power-sensitive approach (Formosinho and Formosinho 2012). Equally, using a polyvocal approach recognises the presence and importance of many narratives, including the researcher's own. Pound's (2003) alongside epistemology was influential when considering power relationships in terms of positionality, and a participatory, 'alongsided' positionality was chosen, based on the researcher's beliefs and values.

### **Advocate researcher**

During the first phase of the fieldwork, it became clear that the children had unmet needs during their time in the settings, and their parents either knew or had concerns but were unable to express this to staff. For example, it was observed that Ahmed had a turn in his eye which had not been noticed. His mother expressed her concern about his toileting, which at that point the nursery had not addressed. Hassan was noticeably isolated within the class of children, and his teacher seemed to lack experience of supporting a child with selective mutism. This created a tension, "*a living contradiction*" (Whitehead 1989, 41) for the researcher. As a practitioner already working for the local authority on behalf of other vulnerable children, the professional expectation would be to provide advice and support to the ECEC setting and help them build stronger links with parents, so the child's educational, social and emotional needs were addressed and their ability to achieve improved. As an "*attached*" researcher (Formosinho and Formosinho 2012) who had decided upon an 'alongsided' participatory positionality (Pound 2003), the situation could not be ignored but there was no wish to continue to promote the narrative of vulnerability and helplessness which seemed to be surrounding refugees by raising concerns on behalf of parents and seeming to want to fix a problem. However, there was a professional and ethical responsibility to the children and their parents.

In order to come to a decision about this, the researcher considered two questions that had been asked by the parents at the beginning of the study, "*How will this research benefit our children?*" and "*Please help my son*" (Reflective Journal. Gaywood: 24.11.17). These questions have resonated throughout, and it was these interactions which formed the original verbal contract with the parents, have remained a primary concern and have influenced the researcher's positioning.

The researcher in this study chose to occupy an advocacy positionality (Block et al 2013,9) and so a set of feedback parameters was developed to manage the situation:

Parameters for Feedback to Settings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I would only feedback with the parental consent</li><li>• There would only be ONE thing fed back to the setting.</li><li>• The feedback would take the form of verbal feedback (to ensure it was informal)</li><li>• I would not make judgements about pedagogy or teaching styles</li><li>• The feedback would be addressed to senior staff who would be able to act on it</li><li>• The motive for giving feedback was to improve the children's educational outcomes</li><li>• Once I had spoken to the setting manager/leader I would leave any future action taken in their hands</li></ul>

To reflect on, examine and remediate some of the dilemmas being encountered by including refugee children in research, a research journal has been an important research instrument. The researcher's voice is an intricate part of the methodological positioning; therefore, the research journal has been a vital tool, offering space to rigorously interrogate self, identify issues regarding positionality and ensure an open, ethical approach which is responsive to the relational nature of this study. In addition, it has afforded the opportunity to reflect on the intricate patterns of power in operation, within the relationships, contexts and interchanges within this piece. Where the inevitable moments of dissonance have occurred, these too were systematically scrutinised to ensure robust reflexivity (Pillow: 2003).

### **Insider – outsider**

Generally associated with migration studies is the issue of who should carry out research with refugee children and tends to be described in terms of an insider-outsider dichotomy. This also incurred inner conflict.

*“Of late I have come to realise that some of my dissonance about being a researcher has come from a deep seated feeling that I really have no right to be researching with*

*the Syrian families as I am not Syrian and have absolutely no experience of being displaced. What I have realised is that these feelings are valid, but they are not the whole picture. The pilot study showed me that parents often have complex reasons for wanting to engage in research and my guilty feelings are because I am openly an 'outsider'”*

*(Reflective Journal. Gaywood:1.7.17)*

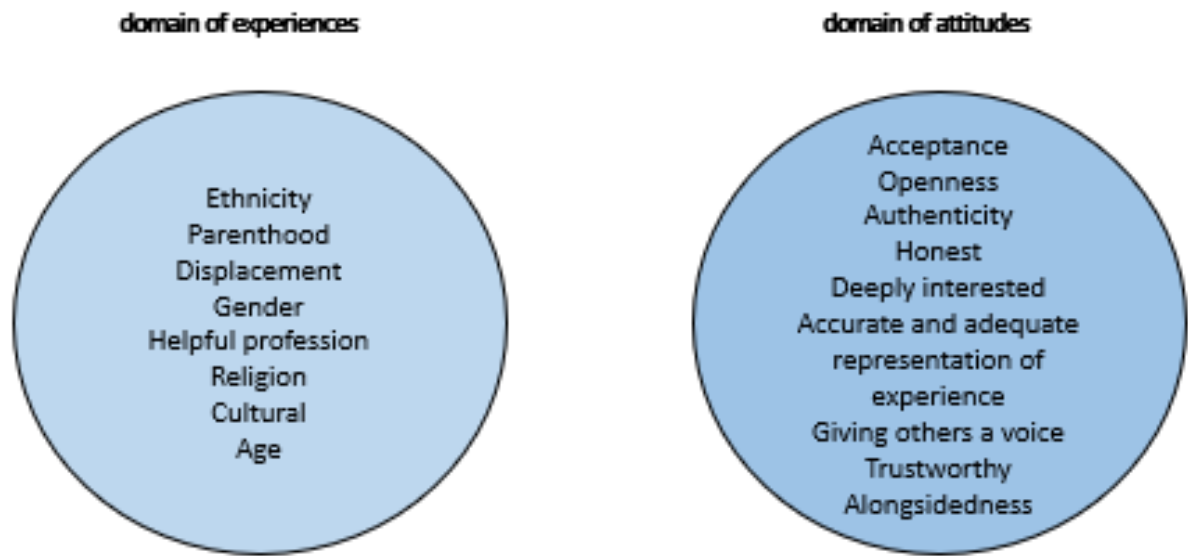
Dwyer and Buckle (2009) introduce a more complex positionality which goes beyond the insider-outsider dichotomy, describing the hyphen as being the space between (2009:60). Drawing on their experiences as researchers they conclude that it is possible to operate as both insider and outside.

During the first phase of field work, the researcher was able to foreground aspects of shared experiences, which included: being the granddaughter of displaced people; cultural similarities; mother of a large family, and an advisory teacher for children who have faced significant challenges. These helped to form trust and develop understanding so, although an “outsider,” it allowed her to become “an accepted guest” Whitmarsh (2011, 540). However, using shared experiences as methods to engage participants, does not necessarily indicate positionality. Krumer-Nevo, and Sidi (2012) make reference to attitudes which they advocate as important for the researcher,

*“Instead, we posit that the core ingredient is not insider or outsider status but an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one’s research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience.” (2012, 59)*

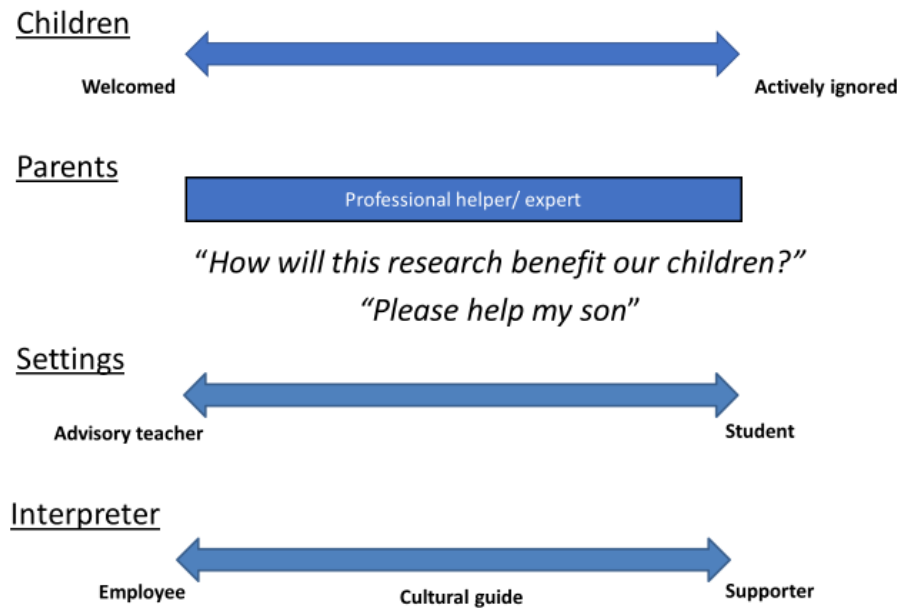
Moser (2008) discussed the role of personality in research and Pound’s alongside epistemology (2003) suggest a more complex positionality which goes beyond the insider outsider dichotomy generally associated with migration studies and beyond the “hyphen” (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). It seems, a researcher can locate themselves within a domain of experience which is either shared or not shared by the research participants. Or they can locate themselves within a domain of attitude which determines their ethical approach to all involved within the study. The positional domains of experience and attitude have been developed (Gaywood 2018).

Figure 3. Possible positional domains in the field



Whilst the domain of experience can be helpful, it can never be altered, so should a researcher only choose to carry out research with those within their domain, the field would be limited. However, the opposite is true for those who choose to position themselves within the domain of attitudes. For the purposes of this study, the researcher has made an active choice to position herself in this domain, using the research journal (as previously discussed) as a tool of enquiry, along with other research colleagues to maintain ongoing scrutiny and rigour when including refugee children in research.

Ryan (2015) acknowledges the fluid nature of relationships within research and refers to “*the dynamic rhythms of our multi-positionalities*” (2015) suggesting positionality can be altered through the relational nature of the research. These relationships can be presented as “*axioms of positionality*” (Lyndon 2018). For this piece of research it has been helpful to use these axioms to attempt to quantify the ever-changing nature of the relationships with the participants, in order for the researcher to fully consider her positionality. The figure below represents the range of responses from each participant group. It suggests that a researcher’s positionality is not just defined by their own ideas, ethics and values but is also impacted by the participant responses, attitudes and beliefs. This is particularly important for researchers who choose a participatory research methodology.



(Lyndon and Gaywood 2018)

## Conclusion

The issues of involving refugee children in research are complex and wide reaching. There is a paucity of research in Early Childhood and Education studies which is concerned solely with the everyday experience of refugee children, therefore, to find methodological and the conceptual frames which adequately enable the researcher to examine this is a challenge. As a doctoral student, the researcher deemed it necessary to construct new frames. Equally, to find methods which can successfully navigate the complexities of culture difference and a language barrier, which are power sensitive has also required creativity. The multimodal methods and drawing methodology have worked well. Each of the children and their families recognised their stories during the member checking, as did the Early Educators.

Working as a practitioner researcher within a local authority where it is acknowledged there is little prior experience of supporting refugee children has provoked numerous ethical and positional issues, which were unforeseen. However, being a known senior practitioner has afforded the researcher a level of influence, enabling access, the ability to establish trusting relationships more quickly and confidence to contest unchallenged narratives.

Locating positionality has been vital but difficult. The researcher has developed a positionality of attitude which can endure the rigours that dynamic relationships can bring, when including refugee children in research. This positionality is transferable and could be used by future researchers to work with other young children and their families who also may have experienced significant challenges or belong to a marginalised people group.



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