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# Living in the Shadow of Political Decisions: Former Refugees' Experiences of Supporting Newly Arrived Refugee Minors

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*MS received March 2020; revised MS received September 2020*

Intending to support the cultural integration of unaccompanied refugee minors into the Swedish society, the Save the Children charity organization arranged meeting places in 2018 in four municipalities in Sweden. The mentors for the activities at these meeting places were recruited among former refugees who themselves had arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied minors. The study aimed to explore the experiences of being a mentor offering peer support to unaccompanied minor refugees at the meeting places. In this study, four semi-structured group interviews were conducted at the meeting places with 14 mentors, also former refugees. Data were analysed using thematic network analysis. Although the respondents expressed frustration concerning the Swedish migration politics, they all perceived the helping role as of utmost importance and connected this to positive emotions. The study highlights the unique contributions of peer support to the integration process of refugee minors by mentors providing social support, sharing experience-based knowledge and helping minors to navigate an often confusing and complex welfare system.

Keywords: refugee, unaccompanied minors, integration, peer support, qualitative

## Introduction

Society faces a challenge of promoting the health, empowerment and integration of unaccompanied refugee minors, as well as to find ways to facilitate and establish their integration. The term 'unaccompanied minors' refers to persons up to the age of 18 years who are separated from their families once they arrive in the host country and who seek asylum. Adolescents comprise the majority of people

seeking asylum worldwide. [UNHCR \(2018\)](#) estimates that about 50% of all refugees are under 18 years of age. According to the Swedish Migration Agency, the majority of unaccompanied refugee minors who have come to Sweden are from Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, Eritrea, and Morocco, with most being boys from 13 to 17 years. Unaccompanied refugee minors face special stressors and challenges in the resettlement process in the new country ([Keles et al. 2018](#)). Consequently, there is an urgent need to find ways to support these minors in the integration process.

In the present study, the support given by mentors to minors at meeting places was examined from the perspective of the mentors, who were themselves unaccompanied refugee minors seeking asylum in Sweden. Thus, the study also provided an opportunity to investigate how the experience-based knowledge of being a former refugee was used when meeting newly arrived refugee minors without parents or guardians.

The number of children seeking asylum who came to Sweden without their parents or other guardians increased sharply in 2014–15. Several European countries witnessed a growing influx of refugees in 2015. In Sweden, more unaccompanied children than ever before applied for asylum in 2014–15. In 2015, 88,300 unaccompanied refugee minors sought asylum in the Member States of the European Union ([Hodes et al. 2018](#)). In Sweden, the Migration Board handled 35,369 applications by unaccompanied children in 2015 ([Swedish Migration Agency 2019](#)). Due largely to the crisis, distrust and suspicion towards asylum seekers grew, especially concerning the age of the minors. In response, in 2016, the Swedish government implemented a more restricted immigration policy ([Dahlgren 2016](#); [Wernesjö 2020](#)). Since the border controls between Denmark and Sweden were introduced in 2016 as part of a more restricted immigration policy, the number of asylum-seeking children has fallen dramatically. The Migration Board's statistics show that 2199 unaccompanied children applied for asylum in 2016, 1336 children in 2017, and 944 in 2018 ([Swedish Migration Agency 2019](#)). The rapidly growing inequality gap in Sweden is particularly pertinent among people who has a migration background ([Trygged and Righard 2019](#)). One study, investigating the importance of education on labour market participation in Sweden among refugees in comparison with native Swedish, shows that unaccompanied and accompanied male and female young refugees have higher risks of being in insecure work force and NEET (neither education, employment or training) compared to native Swedes with comparable levels of education ([Manhica et al. 2019](#)).

In an interview study with asylum-seeking children, the children expressed how difficult it is to be in the asylum process in which the officials doubt their stories and their existence is overshadowed by a constant concern for the future ([Lundberg and Dahlquist 2012](#)). The study further found that the children first seemed satisfied with having their basic needs met such as housing, food, and support. However, over time the children realized the need for in-depth support in addition to basic support services. Sweden has a family-centred welfare system, and lacking a family member who can provide support can lead to the

disappearance of the unaccompanied minors' voice in meetings with representatives of the healthcare and welfare system (Hamed and Bradby 2017). Hamed and Bradby (2017) showed further that the support of guardians for minors is important but cannot replace the support of parents, particularly when unaccompanied children and young people are forced to navigate in a slow-moving and complicated welfare system they do not understand.

In Sweden, all municipalities are now obliged by law to receive and take responsibility for unaccompanied refugee minors seeking asylum. The task of the social services is to ensure that the child receives the support and assistance prescribed by the Social Services Act (SSA 2001: 452). The municipalities have the main responsibility for financing the schooling of unaccompanied children, as well as providing language support and teaching assistants (Aflaki and Freise 2019).

After arrival in the host country, the integration process starts. There are several frameworks that can be used to assess this process. Ager and Strang (2008) have developed a framework, which identifies four themes and ten core domains which each highlights one aspect of integration. The first theme *Markers and means* with its four domains—*employment, housing, education, and health*—represents major factors necessary for successful integration. Ager and Strang emphasize that the domain *education* plays an integral role in supporting the integration of immigrant children. The second theme *Social connections* consists of three domains: *social bonds, social bridges* and *social links*. The *social bonds* domain concerns the inter-group connections and emphasizes the need for a sense of belonging to a particular group. The *social bridges* domain relates to the intra-group connections and promotes the integration between immigrant and native population. Studies have found that the domain *social bridges* facilitated the integration of immigrants in the host culture and decreased the sense of social exclusion (Beirens *et al.* 2007; Phillimore 2012). The *social links* domain relates to access to relevant services provided by the local and government services. The third theme *Facilitators* consists of two domains: *language and cultural knowledge, and safety and stability*. The theme *Facilitators*, and its core domains, suggests removing the barriers of integration and support immigrants to enhance language skills, which in turn facilitate understanding the culture of the country. Furthermore, the *safety and stability* domain relates to immigrants feeling a sense of inclusion and participation in the host country. Finally, the fourth theme is *Foundations* which consists of one domain *Rights and citizenship*, and represents the extents of full and equal rights provided to the refugees in order to becoming engaged within society (Ager and Strang 2008).

Today, research on the integration of unaccompanied refugee minors is limited (Brunnberg *et al.*, 2011). A Swedish interview study conducted among professionals working with unaccompanied minors showed that the absence of primary caregivers/guardians and lack of unconditional love and support in everyday life could entail a special vulnerability for unaccompanied minors. In addition, professionals are not given the task of creating a mutual and long-term relationship with the children (Stretmo and Melander 2013). Social workers express contradictory beliefs about the unaccompanied refugee minors and their needs: the

children are seen as vulnerable and representing a special group within childcare and, at the same time, strong and capable as other children (Backlund *et al.* 2014). Moreover, ordinary methods and routines of social workers are not perceived as suitable to meet the needs of unaccompanied minors. To show consideration for the child social workers tend to avoid conversations about the children's life history (Backlund *et al.* 2014).

The health situation for unaccompanied refugee minors has received attention in recent years, with the general observation that many unaccompanied refugee minors suffer from both mental and physical ill-health and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Nielsen *et al.* 2008; Bronstein and Montgomery 2011; Brunberg *et al.* 2011; Eide and Hjern 2013). The newly arrived unaccompanied refugee minors in Sweden often show a particular vulnerability to serious mental health problems, such as PTSD and depression (Barnombudsmannen 2017; Salari *et al.* 2017), many of whom show a particular vulnerability to mental illness (The National Board of Health and Welfare 2013). Unaccompanied minors describe that access to support, such as personnel at resident care and guardians, is a basic prerequisite for their health and wellbeing (Lundberg and Dahlquist 2012). These minors appreciate having contact with a good mentor that they can talk to about their problems. In this regard, social support is crucial so they are better equipped to deal with the asylum process (Thommessen *et al.* 2015). Thommessen *et al.* (2015) emphasize the importance of supporting asylum-seeking young people's adaptation in the new country and developing well-planned and appropriate interventions (e.g. mentoring systems) for these groups. The children's need for close relationships can be related to a study among adolescent boys in which health is primarily experienced through emotions and relationships between individuals and their contexts (Randell *et al.* 2016). Another study found that social support during the establishment phase has direct effects on perceived depression and the health of the unaccompanied minors (Oppedal and Idsoe 2015). The same study found that efforts to increase cultural competence can strengthen the minors' ability to deal with discrimination and mental health issues.

On the other hand, refugee minors have resources. Indeed, in a follow-up study of asylum-seeking unaccompanied children Wallin and Ahlström (2005) found that many expressed that they were happy with their lives and had adapted well to the move. These authors also reported that those who were satisfied had networks and friends mainly from the same ethnic origin as themselves, but that they also had Swedish friends. Some factors that can promote resilience among refugee children include social support from friends and the community, a sense of belonging, valuing education and connections to the home culture (Pieloch *et al.* 2016). Another study found that having to wait a long time for a permit to stay and being older impact resilience negatively, but four interrelated strategies were found to promote resilience in young refugees: acting autonomously, performing at school, receiving support from peers and parents and participating in the new society (Sleijpen *et al.* 2017).

In the present study, we examined the support the mentors' provided the minors at meeting places from the perspective of the mentors. The mentors were former

refugees who came to Sweden as unaccompanied refugee minors. Thus, the study also provides an opportunity to investigate how the experience-based knowledge of being a former refugee was used in a situation that involved meeting newly arrived unaccompanied refugee minors. Experience-based knowledge is empirical and tacit (Matthew and Sternberg 2009) because it is gained through practice. Peer support is founded on key principals of respect, shared responsibility and mutual agreement of what is helpful, and it concerns above all understanding the other person through shared experiences (Mead *et al.* 2001).

There is little research concerning how former refugees are involved in giving peer support to newcomers and how their experienced-based knowledge is used to support newly arrived refugee minors. Thus, the study aimed to explore the experiences of being a mentor offering peer support to minor refugees at meeting places.

## **Method**

### *Setting and Sample*

In the study group, interviews were conducted with the mentors at four meeting places. The respondents in the study consisted of all accessible mentors ( $n = 14$ ). The mentors were 18–22 years old and the requirement from the charity was that the mentors should be at least 18 years old because the assignment entailed responsibility. All the mentors had a background as an unaccompanied refugee minor. Most of the mentors came from Afghanistan but also from Somalia and Eritrea. The majority came to Sweden in 2015 and all had a permanent residence permit.

The Save the Children charity organization initiated the following project: ‘Meeting places for community establishment of unaccompanied young people’. The project was established in central Sweden and one meeting place was set up in each of four municipalities. The four municipalities have between 7000 and 50,000 inhabitants. Local authorities provided suitable locations for the meeting places. Young adults (mentors), all of whom had their own experience of coming to Sweden as an unaccompanied refugee minor and being an asylum seeker, led the activities at the meeting places. These young persons received education and training as mentors and were supported by the project manager who is employed at the Save the Children charity in the region. The main task of the mentors was to support and involve the newly arrived, unaccompanied minors in the process. The project applied a child rights perspective according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 2015), emphasizing, for example, participation and rights of the minors. The basic idea of the meeting place entails creating an empowerment-oriented activity in which the participating unaccompanied minors were involved in the content of the activity. Empowerment refers to power, strength and involvement; on a micro level, it also entails overcoming difficulties and being able to take control of one’s life (Adams 2008). Opening hours at the meeting places varied, but they were open between 2 and 5 days a week.

The mentors' goal was to promote the newly arrived immigrants' mental health and contribute to their establishment in society.

### *Data Collection*

The interview guide was semi-structured with open-ended questions to allow the informants to speak freely. Four group interviews were conducted that lasted from 90 to 120 min each (a total of 6.5 h). All interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' permission. The four group interviews were conducted at the meeting places in the four municipalities in central Sweden. In total, 14 persons (13 men) participated and all interviews were conducted in 2018.

The interview guide comprised questions about the activities at the meeting places, how the minors were involved in the various activities, questions raised by the minors, problems and resources among the minors and questions about the role of the mentors and challenges they met in supporting the minors.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The study was approved by the Regional Ethical Committee in Uppsala, Sweden (Dnr: 2018/229); ethical considerations were considered throughout the study. The participants were provided with both oral and written information about the study and signed an informed and written consent form. Because all the participants were former refugees and might be more vulnerable than people in the general population, special attention was paid to their emotions and thoughts, which may have become more intensified during the interviews. In addition, support was offered by the Save the Children charity if needed. Participation in the study was voluntary and the participants were informed about their right to end the interview at any time without explanation. All participants had an opportunity to ask questions, both before and after the interview. The interview concluded by asking the participants whether there was anything that had emerged that they wanted to discuss or ask individually or in a group setting.

In the results, quotes are located in a particular group and the group number is shown (Group 1–4); however, for ethical reasons, quotes are not located to a particular person or sex as there was only one female among the 14 mentors.

### *Data Analysis*

In the analysis of the qualitative data interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic network analysis, a method for conducting thematic analysis by creating global, organizing and basic themes of qualitative material (Attride-Stirling 2001). In the first stage of the analysis, all transcripts were read to gain an overall understanding of the content. In the next stage, interviews were re-read and coded. The codes were then clustered into basic themes which, in turn, generated four organizing themes. The organizing themes were then clustered to one global theme, representing the overarching subject matter of the text.

The first author conducted this analysis while both authors discussed the content of the interviews and contributed to the interpretation of the text.

**Results**

From the analysis, a thematic network was developed. Four organizing themes were created from the 10 basic themes that emerged from the analysis: ‘Integrating together’, ‘Living in no man’s land’, ‘Mowing forward’ and ‘Being proud of helping others’ (Figure 1).

These four organizing themes constituted one global theme: ‘Living in the shadow of political decisions’, which expresses the respondents’ frustration of the migration policy that affected the daily lives of the minors who were constantly worried about whether they should be permitted to stay. The mentors reported that the unaccompanied refugee minors were occupied with questions about whether they can stay in Sweden, although some of the minors had already received rejections. According to the mentors, many of the minors they met at the meeting places lived with daily concerns, anxiety and sleeping problems that significantly impacted their school attendance and daily functioning. The minors reported feeling unwanted and that the political opinion was against them, which could be described in terms of ‘being on hold’ and feeling powerless to decisions they had no control over. Thus, living in the shadow of political decisions ruled the lives of the minors. The mentors recognized the plight of the asylum seekers as they were once (not so long ago) in a similar situation. Facing those questions

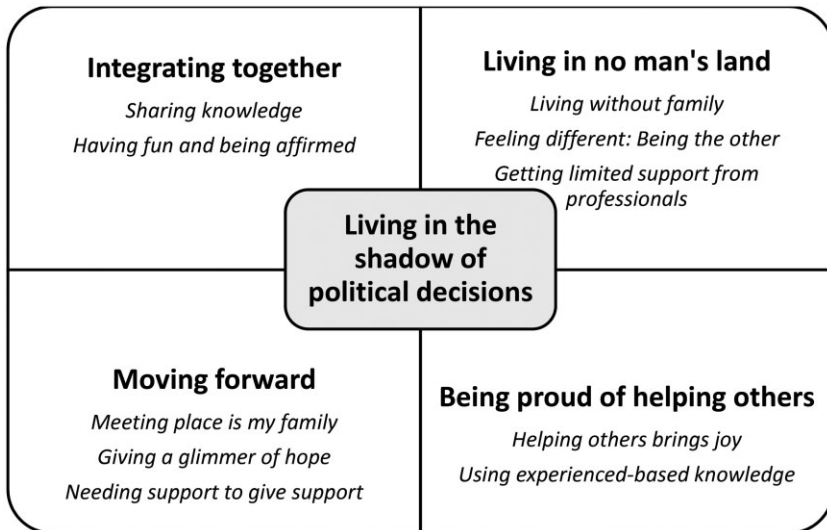


Figure 1.

**Network of global, organizing, and basic themes describing the experiences of the meeting place mentors when supporting newly arrived minors.**

from the minors concerning migration rules and ill health demanded an attitude of patience and hope to meet the expectations and needs of the minors.

## **Integrating Together**

### *Sharing Knowledge*

The mentors noted that one of their main tasks was to inform and provide the newly arrived with general knowledge about the Swedish society (e.g. laws, rules, regulations and housing) and with specific information about The Swedish Migration Agency. The mentors explained that they discussed the potential consequences of the migration policy given that the minors they met were occupied with questions about their future. Even though the mentors did not always know the answers to the minors' questions, they sought relevant information through web sites to the extent that some mentors spent hours searching the internet. One of the mentors said, 'We give them more information about how society works. We give them the knowledge we have now. If we don't know, we learn first and then we give it to them' (Group 2).

### *Having Fun and Being Affirmed*

Of vital importance for counteracting fear and sorrow is the experience of having fun. The mentors described that the recent changes in migration rules and harder laws had an impact on the minors' lives, school attendance and health, especially mental health. One mentor said, 'We have tried to fight to create activities and something that we can gather the guys around and create activities to make them forget about their grief' (Group 1).

The mentors planned the activities at the meeting places together with the minors as a shared activity. Some of the activities included playing games, pool, football, or taking a swim. As one mentor said, 'We first plan what to do during the following week, sometimes a month in advance. Above all, we listen to young people first what they want to do and then we plan better. We do it together' (Group 2).

Several mentors stressed the importance of having fun and some argued that of most importance is that the minors are happy and connected. Activities were consciously used as a means to help the minors forget about their concerns and stress, even if only momentarily. Most of the meeting places had several outdoor activities when the weather permitted. Participating in sports promoted health, self-worth, a sense of belonging and good moral values. Thus, participating in sports was considered a key aspect of having fun and being affirmed.

## **Living in No Man's Land**

### *Living without Family*

The mentors were worried about the minors' wellbeing because of the minors' lack of close relationships and social contacts, but also because the minors lived

without their families. The mentors often referred to their history of being a refugee and coming to Sweden alone. Thus, they had an empathetic understanding (i.e. they could feel with the minors as opposed to feeling for the minors) for the minors who are facing the same challenges that they once faced. For the mentors, it was a difficult task to replace the minors' families with other networks. One mentor said, 'It's really hard for me to tell, so without family . . . you need your family all the time. One needs to get support' (Group 4).

The mentors prioritized supporting the minors and they had to deal with their problems. One mentor explained, 'Everyone has different problems and I have a problem and he has another and everyone thinks differently. We meet minors who every day become increasingly worried. We try to calm them but it is difficult without the family' (Group 1). The mentors said to the minors that they were always welcome to the meeting place no matter how they (the minors) felt. According to the mentors, trust and the overall relationship between the mentors and the minors were important so that the minors could be open and share their worries. As one mentor put it, 'When you know each other, you are more willing to tell your story' (Group 4).

### *Feeling Different: Being the Other*

The mentors discussed the more hostile political climate towards refugees and difficulties the refugees had in establishing contact with the Swedish people. In this respect, the mentors made it clear that they shared this feeling with the minors. They described a feeling of division between the native swedes and the mentor—a process termed 'othering'—in which they felt that in some way they were not seen as individuals but only as a group of former refugees. If one refugee commits a crime or other wrongdoing, they felt a sense of collective shame/guilt. Feeling like an outsider contributed to a sense of being 'the other' and not a full-fledged member of the community.

'For some reason, Swedish people do not dare to have contact with refugees, so it is difficult for the Swedish people. I know it and understand why they can't. It's not our fault and not their fault either. The events in Europe directly affected us and showed a dark and incorrect picture of refugees. It is here in Europe that the crisis exists' (Group 1).

One mentor reflected on the lack of understanding from native people, explaining

'Young people find it difficult to understand people from other cultures. It was the same in my country. When I was in my country, I didn't know about people and things outside my country. But you learn when you are outside your country and living without your family. When you are alone, you understand life and learn to know how life works. One understands that others cannot understand when one has not experienced such stuff as I have' (Group 2).

The mentors explained that the minors felt others (i.e. the Social Services) decided about matters concerning them. The mentors mentioned how they

experienced similar feelings, with one mentor noting that having someone else who decides matters for them caused a sense of injustice.

‘When I came to Sweden, we learned about democracy and justice and learned Swedish. When we discovered what was happening to us, we didn’t think it was fair. There is no democracy, even though we say so. What democracy are you referring to? Is it democratic when we do not have the right to go somewhere and when we do not have the right to live here in Sweden? This opposes democracy’ (Group 1).

### *Getting Limited Support from Professionals*

The mentors expressed that the minors’ confidence in authorities, such as social workers and psychologists, was profoundly shaken. The mentors stressed that the minors did not receive adequate support from the professionals, and a counsellor could not understand the situation of the unaccompanied minors. ‘Counsellors like to say they understand and try to get you to calm down and exercise. Yes, I have tried, but I have such problems so I can’t cope. To say, take it easy does not help’ (Group 4).

The mentors discussed anxiety, sleeping problems and ill health among the minors. One mentor said, ‘I think there are trauma units, but none of us contacted them because we have been to several counsellors and psychologists but received no concrete no help, and then we thought it might be the same thing everywhere’ (Group 1). Because of their experiences, the mentors did not recommend the minors to contact professional support groups.

Concerning meeting with a caring and kind counsellor, one mentor experienced a huge gap in experiences:

‘The counsellor can be an advisor and can tell you that this is what you can do to feel better. I understand that she is a kind and understanding person and therefore I will not offend her, but she cannot do anything to help. The thing is that she lives in a safe society; she has not experienced anything that I have experienced; and then she certainly does not understand what I mean either. Some minors have been visiting the counsellor and say that she is useless, but I have said no, she is not useless, but your problems are of such a nature that she cannot understand them or your special needs’ (Group 1).

The mentors said that information and education, which start directly after the minors’ arrival, emphasized the social norms and societal rules of behaviour. The mentors criticized that process and emphasized that creating and having relationships should be prioritized instead of becoming familiar with societal rules. They explained that it took time to enter and understand Swedish society.

‘You will know with time how it is with rules in Sweden, but immediately when you come here, you should meet someone who knows how it feels to have arrived alone. So, meeting someone is more important than learning rules about how things work in Sweden’ (Group 2).

## **Moving Forward**

### *The Meeting Place is my Family*

The mentors had to handle the powerlessness of the minors and they underlined the importance of moving forward and being strong despite rejections and setbacks. They supported each other and, in being in a location in which mutual support was available, the meeting place felt and served as a second home for them and the minors.

The meeting place replaced the family as the basic social unit of organization for several mentors. As one of the mentors said, 'We are brothers here' (Group 4). Another mentor explained, 'The meeting place means everything to me. When I come here and meet my friends, I feel good, which means a lot to me. It's almost like my second home' (Group 3).

One mentor in another municipality highlighted the importance of new relationships outside of the immediate family: 'It's simply my family here. When I come here, I am happy. I meet all my friends. We sit and discuss everything about how we have it in life (Group 2).

### *Giving a Glimmer of Hope*

The mentors expressed a will to help the young refugees in any way they could, even though they could not do much good. According to one mentor, 'We try to make the minors feel a little stronger and want to fight for the future. We know that we have many problems and many barriers' (Group 4). The mentors often try to offer a glimmer of hope through a strong positive attitude. To accomplish this goal the mentors focus on something small without being able to solve the whole situation. As one mentor said, 'It is not that we get many things done; no, but a little help can solve the problem, although there are still many problems left to solve' (Group 3). The mentors have been in contact with the authorities and even politicians for support. 'I try to help. If I can't help, I will tell my friend. He can't solve their problems either, but he tries to contact the politicians to get them to change something' (Group 1).

### *Needing Support to Give Support*

Being a mentor in the context of the meeting places involved taking responsibility for the other mentors but mostly it meant taking responsibility for the minors. The mentors also emphasized that they required support to be able to help the minors effectively. The mentors admitted that they needed help and support to be able to help the minors. As one mentor stated, 'Yes, everyone must have a mentor. It's important and we, as mentors, also require management and support' (Group 2). They expressed a sense of trust concerning support. 'Having Saved the Children as support provides security; they are so big because it is no easy thing to be young and have to take care of others or do everything ourselves' (Group 1).

## **Being Proud of Helping Others**

### *Helping Others Brings Joy*

The mentors in all four meeting places reported feeling particularly pleased and enthusiastic when they were able to help the minors which brought them closer together. They used phrases such as being a ‘captain’ or being a ‘big brother’ and said that offering help and support was their most important task. They gladly described how they could provide help and support to the minors who were about the same age as the mentors. Helping others not only contributed to joy and pride and a feeling of closeness but it also led to the mental growth of the young mentors. As one mentor put it, ‘First, I am proud of myself and the other mentors. Second, to take responsibility for someone who is of the same age as us, it feels like now I am the captain here. I grow’ (Group 2).

One mentor underlined the mutual relationship, ‘We teach them many things, but we can also learn things from them. It is always a mutual learning experience. It is great to have contact and it feels great to be able to help others’ (Group 3).

One mentor explained, ‘I can say that I can help him in some way anyway. In addition, when we are here at the meeting place, I can do something. I feel like a big brother. They ask, where is it, what is it and I can get everything for them. It feels good to help them’ (Group 4). Another mentor explained, ‘It is the best job in the world that we have. Just being together and having fun. You meet new friends and you get more information about everything’ (Group 2). Helping others had a deeper meaning, as it established a sense of solidarity and cohesion.

‘To be able to live one has to help each other. If we help people, they will help us. If we want to have fun together, we have to become a team, and then we can have fun. When we help the young people that come here, I feel really happy. When they are satisfied, we will all be very happy’ (Group 3).

### *Using Experience-Based Knowledge*

The mentors shared many experiences with each other and with the minors. In particular, their refugee experiences were used to support the minors. One mentor noted, ‘They are very worried and do not know what is happening. Then it is very difficult to focus on one thing (e.g. school) when you do not know what will happen tomorrow. I have been in the same situation, which is why I understand it so clearly’ (Group 3).

The mentors recognized themselves in the minors (‘Because we had that situation and because we know’) (Group 4). Another said, ‘You can show the way’ (Group 2). The focus was on relationships and being there for someone else.

‘Almost all young people who come here had had problems even before they came here, and when they come here and have problems with residence permits, you know precisely how it feels. You know how to help. You know that these are temporary problems’ (Group 1).

Emphasizing the importance of trusting relationships, one mentor explained, ‘There are new rules and you come to a society where you know no one. So, it’s not that easy, but it helps when you have someone to talk to here and be able to express your feelings’ (Group 2).

## **Discussion**

In this study, the minors’ situation and the mentors’ peer support for the target group (i.e. the minor refugees) were described from the perspective of the mentors, who were once refugees but who overcame various challenges. Their supporting role, although demanding and time-consuming, was the commitment to meet the needs of the minors, which was a source of pride and joy to be able to help.

### *Challenges in the Integration Process*

According to the mentors, the lives of the minors were heavily overshadowed by the constant concern for the future and fear of not receiving the urgently needed residence permit from the Swedish Migration Agency. This situation forced the mentors to deal with difficult emotions of the minors’ (e.g. despair, hopelessness, emptiness, loneliness, fear, and feelings of isolation). To deal with these emotions the mentors had to show a perpetual hope when meeting the minors.

The growing distrust of refugees from society had consequences for both minors and mentors. According to the mentors, the minors faced an atmosphere of growing suspicions in their municipalities and a radical shift from compassion and empathy to contempt and disdain. Based on the present results, the mentors explained that the minors felt questioned and treated differently from the native population. In addition, their motives in coming were frequently questioned by the authorities and others. These findings are consistent with those from a study showing that suspicions about asylum seekers’ motives and identities have increased in recent years (Dahlgren 2016). The minors could not live where they wanted but were placed in special living arrangements in municipalities, and they felt that the local authorities completely governed their lives. The mentors did some advocacy work, such as contacting the authorities or politicians in an attempt to focus on the life situation and rights of the minors, however without success. Advocacy aims to enable people to have a voice, to express their needs and wishes and protect their rights (Henderson and Pochin 2001; Newbigging and Ridley 2018). The refugee crisis in Sweden is part of a larger European phenomenon in which unaccompanied refugee minors are seeking asylum from difficult circumstances. Representing the category of unaccompanied minors contributed to the feeling of being an outsider and affected the self-image of the minors. The problematic construction of young people as ‘unaccompanied’ is described by Stretmo (2019). The results of our study that experiences of feeling like an outsider among the mentors and minors illustrate the long-reaching human consequence of the refugee crisis affecting local communities and human interactions, as well as how quickly public opinion can shift. The feeling of being an outsider is associated

with increased intolerance and the process of ‘othering’. This notion of othering has been connected to racism, identity and difference. The process of ‘othering’ identifies those that are thought to be different from oneself, reinforcing and reproducing dominant and subordinated positions (Johnson *et al.* 2004).

Research has shown that contributing to the health and wellbeing of refugee minors is a challenging task for the welfare sector. In line with this research, our study shows that support from the local authorities and trauma units to the minors was not sufficient. Health inequalities between the native and immigrant population in Sweden seem to persist even after the latter has lived in the new country for some time (Ranjbar *et al.* 2017). One study found that a large number of unaccompanied refugee minors suffered from PTSD symptoms, indicating the need for mental health support (Salari *et al.* 2017). Research also shows that schools have difficulties in supporting refugee minors (Pastoor 2015). According to this study, the school counsellors were kind and nice, but unable to understand the demanding life situation of the minors. The ‘nice counsellor syndrome’ is manifested by well-meaning, but hindering them to adopt a role as social justice advocates (Bemak and Chung 2008). Our study demonstrates that efforts from the voluntary sector may reach out to the newcomers. Moreover, the use of peer support as a complement to the interventions arranged by the authorities appears to be a viable approach. The local authorities provided the locations while the charity took responsibility for the activities at the meeting places, exemplifying effective small-scale cooperation between governmental and voluntary sectors.

### *Sharing Experienced-Based Knowledge*

Our findings indicate that the use of experience-based knowledge in peer support was beneficial. Connection between the mentors and the minors was based on mutual experience, and Mead *et al.* (2001) underline the importance of understanding and validating the individual for who they really are. Moreover, social support and trust in relationships were a cornerstone for the wellbeing of the minors. Pieloch *et al.* (2016) highlight the importance of social support and connections to home culture as one of the aspects of promoting and fostering resilience among refugee youth. The mentors at the meeting places represented the same ethnic backgrounds as the minors and knowledge of the homeland cultures. In this sense, they served as an authentic representation of the home culture in the new context. The mentors also had good knowledge of the Swedish language and culture and therefore could bridge the gap between the known and the new for the minors. The third theme of Ager and Strang, *Facilitators*, which consists of *language and cultural knowledge*, and *safety and stability*, was prominent in the work of the mentors. They could facilitate the minor’s understanding of the new culture. Families in the home countries could not be replaced, but new relationships could be created at the meeting places and life in the new country could become more meaningful. At the meeting places, the mentors and minors could create trusting, honest and authentic relationships based on a common and shared background.

Social connection and social bonds which enables people to share cultural practices are described as beneficial contributing towards integration (Ager and Strang 2008). With reference to Ager and Strang, the *social bonds* domain, which represents the inter-group connections and a sense of belonging, was especially prominent. Honneth (2014) argues that people need recognition in human relationships to form and maintain healthy identities, identifying three key forms of recognition: love, rights, and solidarity. Mentor support and recognition of the minors was especially important given that the support from the society was perceived as insufficient. Furthermore, there were few trauma units to provide care or support. The results showed that the mentors could easily recognize themselves in the minors' shoes and could, through that recognition, provide support and strengthen the integration process. On the other hand, recognizing themselves in the minors could result in the emergence of profoundly intense and painful emotions. The study also highlights that support to the mentors, arranged by the programme manager of the charity, was vital for easing their emotions and responsibilities in their altruistic role of helping others. Besides providing social support, the mentors emphasized the importance of searching for reliable and valid knowledge and informing the minors about the intricacies of the Swedish asylum process. This approach is in line with a previous study conducted in Sweden that similarly stresses the protective role of social support and underlines the importance of clarifying the complex asylum-seeking process (Thommessen *et al.* 2015).

At the meeting places, the minors had the opportunity to engage in several activities, but they were also offered psychosocial support. Activities at the meeting places were created with the intention that the minors would be involved in the planning of the activities. This arrangement allowed the minors to decide over small things in life, which may produce a feeling of being in charge to some degree, which undoubtedly is a key element in contributing to empowerment (Adams 2008). Meeting places contributed to the integration of both minors and mentors whose background and knowledge were used and valued. Even more, the helping role brought a sense of joy and meaningfulness to the mentors.

### **Methodological Considerations**

Qualitative studies have strengths and limitations that can emerge while conducting an exploratory, qualitative analysis. In the current study, the study participants were former refugees from four municipalities. The participants talked freely about several topics regarding their role and work with the minors at the meeting places. The mentors seemed willing to share their knowledge and participate in the study. They had a good knowledge of Swedish and could express themselves. Perhaps most importantly, they were considered (by the charity organization) to be well-integrated into the Swedish society at the time they were recruited as mentors. Meeting the minors several times a week allowed the mentors to gain insight into the life and needs of the minors. The mentors related their own experiences to the minors' situation because of the shared experiences, and they were able to reflect on the experiences describing both their own role and

voicing the life situation of the minors. The interview questions were posed as openly as possible with probing questions to obtain more detail, which may have contributed to the obtainment of comprehensive descriptions. Being a social worker, the principal author (E.R.), who conducted the interviews, had extensive experience in interviewing adolescents. Reflexivity throughout the research process, having both authors contributing to the analytical process and discussions with colleagues at higher seminars were central to establishing credibility and confirmability of this study (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Malterud 2001).

A limitation could be that the interviewer was female and representing the dominant population, which could have restricted the flow of information. On the other hand, the interviewer, being unknown and not connected to the charity organization, could induce the participants to express criticisms towards society and speak freely about the situation of the minors. The study was conducted in one Swedish region with a small number of respondents. Findings from qualitative studies are not meant to be generalized and one limitation of this study concerns the transferability of the results. We do believe that the former refugee minors may share many experiences and therefore the findings could be transferred to a similar small-town setting. The sex distribution was extremely unbalanced, with only one woman among the 14 mentors. Consequently, the transferability of the findings might be limited to male mentors. The participants who were interested in taking part in the study had the experience of being unaccompanied refugee minors. This circumstance can be seen as both a weakness and strength in that they sometimes talked about their personal experiences and those of the minors.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study contributes to the knowledge about how peer support plays an important role in the integration process of refugee minors. The findings reflect the experiences of people affected by the national political decisions concerning the right to stay permanently or temporarily in the host country, which affected the daily lives of the newly arrived unaccompanied minors and their general well-being. Supporting the minors demanded that the mentors had to maintain an attitude of incessant hope of bettering the lives of the minors. It also meant that the mentors had to express faith and inexhaustible humour at the meeting places. Despite being forced to deal with despair and other difficult emotions, the results underscore the important role of feeling passionate about helping others. Moreover, the experiences of being a refugee were valued and shared during meetings with unaccompanied minors. The participants asserted that the support from the Swedish authorities was inadequate and the study suggests that support given at the meeting places may be a good complement. The mentors appear to have succeeded in involving the minors in the activities of the meeting places and providing them with knowledge, support and hope in everyday life.

The study emphasizes the unique contributions of peer support to the integration process of the minors (e.g. by mentors providing social support, sharing

experience-based knowledge and helping the minors to navigate an opaque and complex welfare system). The integration process is complicated and highly bureaucratic and further studies are needed on how to use experienced-based peer support.

### **Acknowledgements**

We want to thank the participants in this study. We would also like to express gratitude to the Save the Children charity organization for providing us the possibility to conduct the study.

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