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Experiences and Perceptions of Academic Motivation in Adolescents With a Refugee Background: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Little previous research exists on academic motivation in refugee adolescents, and none has been conducted in the UK that might help educators to promote motivation and mitigate demotivation in the young people they support. The aim of this study is to help address this gap by exploring experiences and perceptions of academic motivation in refugee adolescents settled in the UK. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or online with three refugee adolescents and six key informants who support the education of refugee adolescents. Data was interpreted by reflexive thematic analysis, which generated three themes: refugee adolescents are striving for stability and security; academic motivation is affected by social and academic relationships; and refugee adolescents are unique individuals with varied educational needs. Of particular note, positive social and academic relationships were found to be motivating, whereas instability in refugee adolescents' lives and negative interactions with teachers were demotivating. The findings also highlight the importance of recognising refugee adolescents' individuality and their unique characteristics, which inform their educational needs and academic motivation.

1 | Introduction

In 2022, 17% of the 89,398 asylum applications in the United Kingdom (UK) were from individuals who were 17 or under at the time of application (Home Office 2023). All children and adolescents (under 18) who apply for asylum in the UK are entitled to placement in education (Department for Education 2018). However, for adolescents over 18, access to education (and higher education in particular) may be more restricted, which may be problematic given that 48% of asylum applications in the UK were made by those aged 18 to 29 in 2022 (Home Office 2023). A comparison of educational policy in England and Sweden has shown that while the education of refugee children is actively considered in policy discourse in Sweden, there has thus far been little focus on the education of refugee children in national educational policy in England (McIntyre et al. 2020). McIntyre and Hall (2020) have argued that the prevailing emphasis on

controlling immigration and other economic factors has led asylum-seeking and refugee pupils to become increasingly invisible to policymakers in the UK.

The importance of education for young people who have experienced forced migration is highlighted by research that shows a relationship between higher levels of education and improved socioeconomic outcomes as refugee children reach adulthood (Gladwell 2021). The evident value of education to young refugees' prospects is recognised by growing research in the educational experiences of refugee adolescents (e.g., Bartlett et al. 2017; McBride et al. 2018; Wong et al. 2018). The present study aims to contribute to this research by exploring refugee adolescents' experiences of academic motivation and the perceptions of key informants who support the education of refugee adolescents in the UK. It is hoped that insights from this study may help educators in their support for refugee adolescents to thrive and remain in education.

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1.1 | Definition of Academic Motivation

There does not appear to be a commonly agreed definition of academic motivation in existing literature. Researchers describe academic motivation in different terms, for example, as “the driving factor that influences a person to attend school and attain a degree” (Clark et al. 2014, 30) or “students’ drive to learn effectively in the academic setting” (Datu and Yang 2021, 3959), or, in quantitative studies, they specify the instrument used to measure academic motivation (e.g., Vecchione et al. 2014). In the absence of a universal definition of academic motivation, an operational definition was developed for the present study: ‘academic motivation’ refers to behaviours that relate to a student’s drive and effort to engage in learning and to persist with learning when faced with challenges.

This study draws on self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000) as this theoretical framework for motivation encompasses a broad set of considerations and is commonly used to frame research on academic motivation (e.g., Cha 2020; Manganelli et al. 2021; Wu et al. 2022). Self-determination theory makes the assumption that humans have an innate desire—termed ‘intrinsic motivation’—to be autonomous and a tendency to engage in activities they find interesting or enjoyable (Deci and Ryan 2000). In addition to autonomy, intrinsic motivation is fostered by a sense of competence and a sense of belonging and affiliation with others, termed ‘relatedness’ (Deci and Ryan 2000). Self-determination theory posits a spectrum of types of motivation with internally regulated intrinsic motivation at one end, through ‘extrinsic motivation,’ which is regulated by external factors, to ‘amotivation,’ which is the absence of motivation. In an academic setting, intrinsic motivation may be engendered by opportunities for choice (e.g., in the subjects a student learns), an optimal level of challenge that is within the person’s capabilities, and a safe and supportive environment (Deci and Ryan 2000). Intrinsic motivation may be undermined and extrinsic motivation may become activated in response to external forces such as reward or punishment, expectations from others, or a sense of guilt (Deci and Ryan 2000).

1.2 | Academic Motivation in Refugee Adolescents

Previous contemporary research on academic motivation has largely focused on adolescents with minority ethnic backgrounds (Isik et al. 2018) or adolescents without a migration background (e.g., Clark et al. 2014; Datu and Yang 2021; Wu et al. 2022). Research on academic motivation that included refugee adolescent participants is much more limited. Cha’s (2020) study focused on academic motivation in 664 refugee participants, of whom 45% were female, at the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. Participants’ average age was 18 years, within a range of 11 to 40 years, and 14% were aged 11–15 years. Results showed that students’ sense of belonging at their school was the strongest predictor of academic motivation, female students had higher levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation than their male peers, and there was no association between students’ age and academic motivation (Cha 2020).

Two other studies explored academic motivation in Syrian refugee students settled in Turkey. One study with 263 participants, of whom 76% were female, included 13.7% adolescents aged 16–20 years and used a questionnaire developed by the researchers to assess what factors motivated them to learn Turkish (Turker and Celik 2022). Results showed that students were highly motivated to learn Turkish in order to meet their survival needs, achieve professional success, and adapt socially (Turker and Celik 2022). Karaman’s (2021) study compared levels of bullying, (goal-focused) achievement motivation, and resilience in 143 Syrian refugee and 146 native Turkish adolescents with a mean age of 16 years. This study showed that Syrian refugee adolescents experienced higher levels of bullying and lower levels of achievement motivation than Turkish students; however, there was no difference in resilience between the groups (Karaman 2021).

Previous research suggests that puberty may play a role in refugee adolescents’ engagement with education. A study conducted in Australia showed that exposure to war accelerated pubertal timing in refugee boys and that energetic stress (resource scarcity or nutrition deprivation) suppressed pubertal development in refugee girls (Black et al. 2023). These findings may be significant for male refugee adolescents’ academic motivation in light of a study with non-refugee adolescents that showed that advanced pubertal status was associated with lower self-efficacy and valuing, which in turn were associated with lower academic motivation and achievement (Martin and Steinbeck 2017).

Academic motivation has been extensively studied in adolescents with minority ethnic backgrounds. In their review of 45 such studies conducted largely in the United States, Isik et al. (2018) found that a wide range of factors influenced academic motivation in positive and negative ways—including individuals’ beliefs in the value of education, family-related factors such as socioeconomic status, school-related factors such as teacher support, and social factors such as peer influence and racism. The relevance of findings from research in minority ethnic adolescents to the experiences of refugee adolescents has been questioned by Stevenson and Willott (2007), who argue that the lived experiences of refugee adolescents are distinct from those of other minority ethnic adolescents and warrant dedicated effort to understand their specific educational experiences and needs. Young people with forced migration backgrounds may have witnessed or experienced conflict, violence, separation from family, detention, and uncertainty about their legal status (Wood et al. 2020).

1.3 | Refugee Adolescents’ Experiences of Adjustment to Education

As there has been limited research to date on academic motivation in refugee adolescents, literature on their experiences of adjustment to education might offer contextual insights into factors that may affect their academic motivation. Contemporary research on refugee adolescents’ experiences of academic adjustment has been conducted in Australia (Sheikh et al. 2019), Canada (Nakhaie 2021), Jordan (Krafft et al. 2022), Lebanon (Garbern et al. 2020), Turkey (Aydin

and Kaya 2017), the UK (Hastings 2012; McBride et al. 2018; McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021; UNICEF 2018, 2022), and the US (Bartlett et al. 2017). Further insights from research on inclusive education in international contexts are provided in a special issue of the International Journal of Inclusive Education (Veck et al. 2021). As education systems vary considerably between countries, the research conducted in the UK is considered most relevant for the present study and is elaborated below.

Refugee adolescents in the UK face an array of challenges to accessing and remaining in education (UNICEF 2018). Systemic challenges include long waiting lists for school places, complex online application processes, and teachers' lack of understanding about refugee adolescents' needs (UNICEF 2018). Difficulties in young refugees' home circumstances, such as poverty and unstable accommodation, can also make adjustment to education challenging (UNICEF 2018). In some cases, their academic engagement may be affected by mental health difficulties resulting from recent experiences of forced migration (Arakelyan and Ager 2021; Oleimat et al. 2023). In addition, adolescents' education may have been disrupted or entirely interrupted for several years during their migration (McBride et al. 2018; UNHCR 2021). Despite these challenges and barriers, research suggests that, on the whole, refugee adolescents place considerable value on education and make immense efforts to adjust to and thrive in education (McBride et al. 2018).

McBride et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study with 25 Syrian refugee children aged 5–18 years, 21 parents, and 18 educational stakeholders at schools across four local authorities in Scotland. Their findings showed that most refugee children felt happy and settled in school, but also that individual experiences of adjustment varied considerably. English language acquisition was an important factor in the children's educational adjustment; some students adjusted more easily because they had acquired some basic English on their journey to the UK, while others did not speak English on arrival, and this led them to feel isolated from their peers and impeded their educational progress. However, some teachers of English as an additional language (EAL) cautioned that overemphasising English language learning can shift focus away from refugee students' engagement with the wider curriculum, which is important for their overall academic progress, and extra-curricular activities, which are needed for social integration (McBride et al. 2018). A smaller qualitative study conducted by Hastings (2012) included six male refugee adolescents aged 12–16 years from Afghanistan, Somalia, and Turkey, and explored their experiences of adapting to a secondary school in an inner-city area of London, UK. Analysis by interpretative phenomenological analysis resulted in themes that reflected the need for help from teachers and peers to adapt to the school and the need for a sense of safety and belonging (Hastings 2012). All participants expressed a high level of motivation to learn English; the language barrier was the most pronounced common challenge for refugee adolescents (Hastings 2012).

Researchers have noted that refugee adolescents are not a homogenous group; indeed, they found that refugee students in

the same school had quite different experiences of academic adjustment (McBride et al. 2018; McIntyre et al. 2020). This heterogeneity is consistent with a model of academic motivation based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Skinner et al. (2022) propose that academic motivation is shaped by each individual's unique set of complex and dynamic social environments. These environments range from microsystems, including interactions with parents, peers, and teachers; an array of mesosystems within their immediate community; and broader macrosystems including economic, social, legal, and political forces (Skinner et al. 2022). Miri (2024) also invokes the ecological systems theory to call for consideration of multi-dimensional environments in the development of policies and practices relating to refugee education. Research supporting these models includes a study conducted in the US and Germany which showed that parents can affect non-refugee adolescents' academic motivation (Häfner et al. 2018) and collaborative research in Italy and the US that showed that parents affect the psychological and social adjustment of refugee adolescents (Karataş et al. 2020, 2021).

1.4 | Research Rationale and Aim

This review highlights a paucity of literature on academic motivation in refugee adolescents and a lack of such research in the UK. Whilst the research on refugee populations in Kenya (Cha 2020) and Turkey (Karaman 2021; Turker and Celik 2022) offers some insights, it cannot be assumed that the findings reflect the experiences of refugee adolescents settled in other countries which have different cultural, socioeconomic, political, and educational environments. Refugee adolescents themselves are not a homogenous group, as every individual brings a different set of experiences to their present context (McBride et al. 2018). Furthermore, the experiences of minority ethnic students may not reflect those of refugee adolescents whose academic motivation may be affected by their unique experiences of forced migration (Stevenson and Willott 2007). The aim of the present study is to investigate the lived experiences of academic motivation in refugee adolescents and the perceptions of key informants who support the education of refugee adolescents in the UK.

2 | Methodology

Three refugee adolescent participants supported by Refugee Education UK and six key informant participants who support the education of refugee adolescents were recruited by purposive sampling with the assistance of Refugee Education UK (see Table 1 for an overview of participant demographics). The overall sample size is consistent with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) and the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2013, 50) relating to sample size for an interview-based research project using reflexive thematic analysis. Recruitment of refugee participants can be challenging, and refugees are often considered a 'hard-to-reach' group (Ellard-Gray et al. 2015), where a number of necessary stringent safeguarding measures are required to ensure research can be conducted in an ethical way. Due to

TABLE 1 | Demographic characteristics of participants.

Refugee adolescents	Gender	Country of origin
Jamal	Male	Sudan
Mohammad	Male	Iran
Samira	Female	Guinea
Key informants	Gender	Relevant background
Annie	Female	EAL teacher
Harriet	Female	EAL teacher
Lisa	Female	Educational mentor
Milly	Female	EAL teacher and educational mentor
Tina	Female	Work with a refugee education charity
Tracey	Female	Educational mentor

Abbreviation: EAL, English as an additional language.

these challenges, qualitative research about refugee experiences tends to focus on smaller participant samples to provide in-depth understanding (e.g., Li 2018; Sheikh et al. 2019). The responses of refugee adolescent and key informant participants were viewed and analysed as complementary data. The observations of key informant participants strengthened the overall findings as they reflected the experiences of additional refugee adolescents, including those too young or too vulnerable to be directly interviewed. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to ensure that the findings were driven by and located within the participants' unique and varied lived experiences or perceptions. For example, refugee adolescents were asked, "what are your main reasons for studying?" and key informants were asked, "please tell me about your perceptions of factors that positively influence academic motivation in the refugee adolescents you have supported." Pseudonyms were used from the outset of the research to protect participants' anonymity (Table 1).

Inclusion criteria for refugee adolescent participants required them to be aged 18–24 years, have at least refugee status, be enrolled in formal education, and have sufficient proficiency in English to be able to understand and respond to interview questions. The criteria for adolescent participants' age range and refugee status were established, respectively, to safeguard younger refugee adolescents and to avoid compounding anxiety related to uncertainty about legal status. The adolescent participants' age range of 18–24 years is within the contemporary understanding of adolescent growth as taking place between 10 and 24 years of age (Sawyer et al. 2018). Key informant participants were required to be aged 18 years and over and directly supporting the education of one or more refugee adolescents. This study was approved by the College of Psychology Research Ethics Committee at Birmingham City University.

Participants' responses, henceforth referred to as 'the data', were analysed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) to identify patterned meanings across the full dataset. Data was analysed by closely following the process of reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2022): (1) familiarisation with the full dataset by careful reading of all the transcripts; (2) systematic iterative coding of the dataset to develop code labels ascribed to relevant explicit and implicit concepts within the dataset; (3) generation of initial themes by examining all the code labels and identifying shared patterned meaning in the context of the research question; (4) review of the initial themes by cross-referencing with the full dataset to check whether the patterns conveyed a compelling story about participants' experiences and perceptions of academic motivation; (5) refinement, definition, and naming of themes through development of a thematic map; (6) further refinement during development of a coherent analytic narrative using selected vivid extracts from the dataset. In keeping with the principle of reflexivity, interpretation of the data was informed by the first author's personal experiences as an educational mentor and as a former child refugee (Attia and Edge 2017). The data was collected and coded by the first author, then reviewed and analysed through discussion with the second and third authors. The second and third authors acted as critical reviewers of all aspects of the study, including its design, data collection process, analysis, and reporting.

3 | Analysis and Findings

Reflexive thematic analysis generated three themes: refugee adolescents are striving for stability and security; academic motivation is affected by social and academic relationships and refugee adolescents are unique individuals with varied educational needs. Refugee adolescents are striving for stability and security.

3.1 | Refugee Adolescents Are Striving for Stability and Security

Refugee adolescents' need for stability and security in their lives was found to be an important source of their academic motivation. Conversely, experiences of instability and lack of security were found to compromise academic motivation.

All three refugee adolescent participants said that their main reason for studying was to get a good job. Samira wants to become a police officer, Mohammad is aiming to be a dentist, and Jamal wants to work in computer science. Their conviction that studying will help them to realise their career aspirations was exemplified by Jamal's determination to achieve his goal.

I want to study, I want to be educated. In my opinion, education is key of life. I have a lot of examples and people who finish education, you can get good job, a good life. So of course I want to study. I don't care about the time. Maybe I take time, but I don't care about time.

(Jamal)

The academic motivation exhibited by the refugee adolescent participants was echoed in observations made by key informants. For example, Lisa, an educational mentor, said about the young person she mentors:

... she talks about her future and she wants to pass this GCSE exam because she wants to go to college and she wants a good future.

(Lisa)

It is interesting to note that the career aspirations of the refugee adolescent participants of this study contrast with the less ambitious career expectations of refugee adolescents of a similar age in a Swiss study (Fedrigo et al. 2022). The researchers surmised that their complex migration experiences had led the young people to aim for any type of work in order to feel settled (Fedrigo et al. 2022). The relative ambitiousness of the refugee adolescents in the present study may be related to the encouragement they receive from their mentors and support from Refugee Education UK staff, who help them to navigate administrative barriers to accessing further and higher (tertiary) education.

While the refugee adolescent participants' academic motivation in the present study was found to be strongly driven by their desire to get a job and achieve a stable and secure future, key informants reported that academic motivation can be significantly compromised by experiences that threaten refugee adolescents' security and destabilise their lives. Milly, an EAL teacher and educational mentor, observed that her mentee's ability to study was affected by the uncertainty inherent in the asylum process.

The young person that I'm mentoring at the moment, ... he was claiming asylum, and it took him a while before he got refugee status ... I think that impacted his study skills. He didn't know whether he was going to be staying in the UK or whether he was going to be returning, and I think that really impacted him.

(Milly)

Key informants also spoke about the negative effects of unstable housing on refugee adolescents' academic motivation. Tina, who works for a refugee education charity, said:

... young people who are either in foster families or in some kind of permanent housing association ... where that housing feels secure but also is of a good quality, I think that makes a real difference to people's academic motivation. And on the flipside of that, ... young people who are dispersed through the asylum process ... to a different part of the country ... a change like that can just massively reduce somebody's educational motivation.

(Tina)

The demotivation described by key informants may be related to the toll of instability and uncertainty on refugee adolescents' mental health. Daily stressors have been associated with

an increase in psychiatric symptoms in forced migrants, with a stronger effect observed in children and adolescents compared with adults (Hou et al. 2020), and depression has been negatively associated with academic motivation in adolescents (Elmelid et al. 2015). While the COVID pandemic was arguably destabilising for all young people, research suggests that the pandemic compounded pre-existing vulnerabilities in refugee adolescents (Jones et al. 2021). The refugee adolescent participants in the present study experienced various problems with studying remotely during the lockdowns—limited internet connection (Samira and Jamal), noise from neighbours in shared housing (Jamal), and difficulty in engaging with online classes (Mohammad). However, all three persevered with their studies, as exemplified by Samira's comments about her experience:

It was stressful. The thing is that I didn't have internet; I didn't have Wi-Fi where I used to live before, so I used to connect on my phone. ... I always try to get there on time to do all my work at the same time.

(Samira)

Key informants noted that many refugee adolescents experienced setbacks to their academic motivation during the pandemic, with some faring better than others depending on their background. Milly contrasted the responses of the two young people she mentors:

I think the impact of war, of trauma, can have a massive impact on development and maturity and mental health. ... I think that affected his ability to engage with academia. He'd struggled before lockdown, but in particular, over lockdown. ... he struggled to engage virtually. ... we did lose contact over lockdown. Whereas I was mentoring the other young person during lockdown, and it wasn't a problem at all, but he had already developed a network of friends. I mean, exactly the same age, but he was emotionally more developed.

(Milly)

Milly's suggestion that the two young people's differing migration and acculturation experiences might underlie their different responses to the pandemic is consistent with a study that found an association between unaccompanied minors' circumstances before, during, and after migration and how well they coped with daily hassles (Keles et al. 2016). Research has also shown that refugee adolescents who have experienced trauma and struggle to remain engaged with education may have compromised cognitive function (Mirabolfathi et al. 2022), and loss of interpersonal connections has been linked to depression in refugee adolescents (Rodriguez et al. 2022). In contrast, academic buoyancy has been linked to academic motivation despite daily hassles, though this finding was in Filipino high school students without a background of forced migration (Datu and Yang 2021).

It is clear from their responses that the academic motivation of refugee adolescents participating in this study and those

supported by key informants is principally driven by their aspiration to achieve stability and security through good jobs, and that uncertainty and instability negatively affected their motivation, possibly due to an impact on their mental health.

3.2 | Academic Motivation Is Affected by Social and Academic Relationships

The second major theme relates to the importance of social and academic relationships to refugee adolescents' academic motivation. Family members were found to play an important role in supporting refugee adolescents' academic motivation. Speaking about her sister's encouragement, Samira said "... she has really motivated me. ... she said: come on! you can do this! I'm with you! [exclaimed]" (Samira). Mohammad also described the positive influence his family had on both encouraging him to study and guiding his career goal:

I live with my mum and sister. ... sometimes if I am at home and do nothing, they say go study because you have exams soon. Before when I was in Germany and I wanted to choose a topic I want to study, my mum told me choose dentist—is good.

(Mohammad)

Key informants also spoke about the importance of support from family members. Lisa, an educational mentor, contrasted the loneliness of an unaccompanied boy with a more settled girl who was accompanied by her family:

... the boy that was on his own, he seemed lonely and he seemed really to miss home and he didn't seem to have close friends. There are certainly people who he shared a home with who he didn't know very well and he said generally about people in England that they only do small talk. ... But with the girl, with her family being with her, she seemed to be a lot more settled and I guess, you know, having your parents there helps.

(Lisa)

These findings are aligned with research that showed that family relationships can promote academic adjustment in refugee adolescents (Karataş et al. 2021). Relationships with peers and friends were also found to affect refugee adolescents' academic motivation. Key informants mentioned peers' influence in different ways, including a boy becoming profoundly demotivated and dropping out of education after his friend was moved to a different city (Milly), peers at a school welcoming refugee students and helping them to settle (Harriet), and refugee adolescents being distracted by peers at school (Annie). However, among the refugee adolescent participants, Samira did not speak about her peers, and Mohammad said that friends did not affect his academic motivation. These responses perhaps reflect the fact that Samira and Mohammad have family members in the UK who support and motivate them to study. In contrast, as an unaccompanied young person, Jamal may have a greater need for friendships, which he expressed in his appreciation of a particular friend's support:

And my friend, he helped me a lot. A lot, a lot! So I say thank you for my friend because he knows a lot. So every time I stay with him, I'm improving a little, not like him, but I am improving.

(Jamal)

Jamal's experience is consistent with the findings of studies which suggest that friendships are positively associated with refugee adolescents' social and psychological well-being (Karataş et al. 2021) and can support adolescents' motivation and persistence (Ricard and Pelletier 2016). However, the broader findings of the present study—that refugee adolescents' peer-relationships affect their academic motivation in varied ways—align with a recent review of previous studies on refugee adolescents' peer-interactions which highlights their complexity and the challenges of parsing the multi-dimensional dynamics that may have positive or negative effects on their lives (Schwartz et al. 2021).

While their peer-relationships were found to affect refugee adolescents' academic motivation in different ways, educational mentoring was found to have a consistently positive effect on academic motivation, principally by fostering confidence in the young people. Samira said "We have been doing mentoring since 2018 until now. She is really nice and supportive. Yeah, she's the one who built my confidence." (Samira) This experience is echoed in an observation made by Tracey, an educational mentor:

I think half of it is psychological support because they often know more or less what to do, but they just need a bit of a nudge, and in most cases, they need to be told, 'you can do this; you've improved loads, I remember your writing at the beginning, you've really improved'. And that's what young man 1 said when he gave feedback to the charity; he said that the sessions with me had really boosted his confidence and they made him feel proud of himself.

(Tracey)

Tracey's suggestion that mentoring helps to foster the young person's sense of competence is aligned with one of the three central tenets of the self-determination theory of motivation—autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan 2000). Moreover, the contribution of mentoring to refugee adolescents' psychological well-being reported in this study is consistent with previous research, which showed that mentoring improved academic self-efficacy (Sanchez-Aragon et al. 2021), reduced loneliness, and improved self-esteem in refugee adolescents (Kneer et al. 2019). Whereas educational mentoring was found to have a wholly positive effect on academic motivation, participants of the present study reported both positive and negative experiences with teachers. Jamal and Mohammad described being demotivated by unsupportive teachers, with Mohammad saying: "They were very bad, they didn't explain well and if you ask him a question you get a problem ... one year is gone and we didn't study anything and we failed, everyone failed the exams." (Mohammad). However, Jamal also spoke warmly about a supportive teacher

who encouraged him when he felt embarrassed about making mistakes:

So she teaches me step by step. Yes, if you don't understand something, you will practise more, giving you opportunity to practise more. ... If you study in the class, if you're doing something wrong that people laugh at ... I worry about that. But the teacher supports me, she said, this is not your language, you should have mistakes, so just keep practising.

(Jamal)

These mixed experiences of teaching warrant further investigation as extensive research in non-refugee populations has shown that teachers play a vital role in supporting adolescents' academic motivation (e.g., Frisby et al. 2017; Bartlett et al. 2017).

The importance of a range of supportive relationships to refugee adolescents' academic motivation was highlighted by Tina, whose work for an educational charity brings her into contact with a large number of refugee adolescents and a range of education and support services.

The young people that I think exhibit the best kind of motivational behaviours are the ones where there's more than one person supporting them or more than one area. For people who are alone, they're mostly unaccompanied minors, inevitably, people sometimes let them down ... But that is really well mitigated against if there's more than one person that they can then go to.

(Tina)

Tina's observations align with the findings of Güngör and Perdu (2017), whose study with immigrant students in Belgium showed that acculturating young people rely on multiple resources to help them cope with adversity. Research on refugee education in Norway showed that unaccompanied minors had a greater need for social support outside the school context than their accompanied peers (de Wal Pastoor 2017) and that support in the first years after resettlement was important for unaccompanied minors' mental health and long-term adjustment (Eide and Hjern 2013). Overall, the data related to this theme indicate that a range of social and academic relationships—including family, peers, mentors, and teachers—affect refugee adolescents' academic motivation, and the nature of the effect can depend on the quality of the relationship.

3.3 | Refugee Adolescents Are Unique Individuals With Varied Educational Needs

The third major theme relates to key informants' observations that refugee adolescents' individuality and specific educational needs can sometimes be overlooked, and this can affect their academic motivation. For example, Tina observed that students can become demotivated when their education is stalled in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, which

are typically aimed at adults and focus only on English language learning outside the context of schools or colleges that cover a broader curriculum.

... if there's a young person who's kind of got stuck in ESOL for many years, that can have a really negative impact on educational motivation—but if they're at school and they're able to do a wider range of subjects, that can really improve their educational motivation and they feel like they're making progress towards their ultimate goal.

(Tina)

Harriet, an EAL teacher, noted that even at secondary school, refugee students' access to broader subjects at appropriate ability levels may be restricted because of their limited English language proficiency: "... They were going to be put in very low sets because they thought, well, they can't speak English. ... they were going to be taken out of some of the lessons" (Harriet).

While research has shown that refugee adolescents place a great deal of value on learning to speak English (McBride et al. 2018) and that immigrant students who can speak the destination language experience greater social inclusion (Beißert et al. 2020) and academic motivation (Miyamoto et al. 2020) than those who do not, the present study suggests that focusing exclusively on English language learning can be demotivating for refugee adolescents. This finding aligns with previous researchers' caution not to over-emphasise English language learning at the expense of access to a broader curriculum, which is required for academic progress (McBride et al. 2018). Key informants also observed that the complexity of the current English language curriculum in schools is unsuitable for refugee adolescents because, as Harriet noted, "That is a standard curriculum for people who have been speaking English from early childhood." (Harriet). Tracey described how the complexity of the GCSE English language course affected her mentee's academic motivation:

... with GCSE English, it seemed the more floral, fancy stuff you put in, the higher marks you got ... he just wasn't used to writing in that style, and he found it tedious and I could totally understand ... So his academic motivation dipped at that periodically ... but he was still motivated enough to realise he needed to do it.

(Tracey)

Refugee adolescents' enjoyment of a subject was found to be an important driver of their academic motivation, as noted in Harriet's observation:

...with the younger students, motivation seems to come from their enjoyment of the subject ... So if it's a subject they enjoyed in Ukraine, for example, maths ... because it's fairly universal. ... One of the girls,

she's really enjoyed doing some Spanish ... However, she's been very resistant in subjects such as religious studies.

(Harriet)

Key informants' observation that academic motivation is higher when the young person is interested in the subject highlights the importance of students' autonomy to choose subjects of interest in driving their academic motivation. Previous research framed by self-determination theory showed that autonomy increased students' perception of their competence (Guay et al. 2010), and autonomy was found to be important for supporting students' competence in a range of cultures across the East and West (Nalipay et al. 2020).

Key informants noted that the younger the refugee adolescents were on arrival in the UK, the higher their levels of academic motivation, as Tina explained: "I think that the younger adolescents are generally better motivated than the older ones because I think they perhaps feel a little bit more hopeful." (Tina). Annie suggested that younger adolescents are better able to fit into their new environment:

The only thing I can think that makes him more driven is he was one of three, and he was the youngest ... he came in year 2 [ages 6–7 years], and his sisters came in I think it was 7 and 9 [ages 11–14 years] when they arrived. ... the older you get, the harder it is to fit in ... he sort of blossomed where his two sisters were struggling.

(Annie)

There is currently no extant published research on whether refugee adolescents' ages at the time of resettlement have a bearing on their academic motivation; however, a study comparing siblings who arrived at different ages found that age on arrival was associated with educational attainment such that arriving one year earlier increased the probability of obtaining a higher educational degree by 3.6% (Gerritsen et al. 2019).

There did not appear to be an association between refugee adolescents' gender and their academic motivation. Tina, who has supported many young people in her role at a refugee educational charity, noted that she had observed high and low levels of motivation in both male and female refugee adolescents:

I think there are examples in both genders of very well motivated and less well motivated young people. Yeah, I can certainly think of good examples of it going both ways. And so I don't think I have seen any particular trends.

(Tina)

Indeed, all three refugee adolescent participants—two male and one female—expressed keen interest in studying. Of special note is the sense of optimism and freedom Samira expressed in being able to pursue her academic and professional goals:

... the way we grow up, you are not valid as female, and those girls were raised by a single mum, it was not respected as well. ... you couldn't speak up as females. ... I'm in a country where you are free, where you have a lot of opportunities. I always feel like, you know, I can do this.

(Samira)

These findings conflict with previous research, which showed that refugee girls in Kenya had a higher level of academic motivation than boys (Cha 2020), while immigrant primary school boys in Italy reported less autonomous motives for studying than girls (Alivernini et al. 2018).

The findings related to this theme emphasise the importance of perceiving refugee adolescents not as a homogenous group requiring the same type of educational support but as unique individuals with differing backgrounds, interests, ages, and personalities, all of which inform their educational needs and academic motivation. These findings are consistent with the proposal by Skinner et al. (2022) that academic motivation is shaped by each individual's unique set of complex and dynamic social environments.

4 | Discussion

The purpose of this study is to gain insights into experiences and perceptions of academic motivation in refugee adolescents settled in the UK. Reflexive thematic analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with three refugee adolescents and six key informants resulted in three themes. The first theme—refugee adolescents are striving for stability and security—relates to the finding that refugee adolescents' academic motivation is driven by their aspirations to secure good jobs to achieve stability and security. Findings also showed that refugee adolescents became demotivated when experiencing instability such as unexpected dispersal to a new location or isolation and practical hurdles during the COVID pandemic.

A further theme highlights the importance of social and academic relationships to refugee adolescents' academic motivation. Encouragement from family members and educational mentors was found to be motivating, while relationships with peers and teachers were found to have positive or negative effects on academic motivation depending on the circumstances and quality of relationships. Refugee adolescents with access to a range of support services were better able to sustain academic motivation, as certain deficits, such as lack of parental support, were compensated to some extent by other relationships.

The third theme relates to key informants' observations that refugee adolescents' individuality and specific educational needs can, at times, be overlooked, and this can affect their academic motivation. Key informants raised the issue of refugee adolescents being characterised by their limited English language proficiency, which has led to unsuitable educational placements that did not consider the young person's specific academic abilities and social needs. Findings of this study also highlight the importance of placement in mainstream schools and colleges,

access to a broad curriculum, and some autonomy in the choice of subjects to refugee adolescents' academic motivation. A further finding was that refugee adolescents' ages on arrival in the UK were associated with their ability to engage with education, such that younger adolescents tended to adapt more readily to studying than their older peers. This finding suggests that older adolescents may require additional educational support in the face of competing pressures that may mitigate motivation.

Unlike Cha's (2020) study at the Kakuma refugee camp, which found that female students had higher levels of academic motivation than their male peers, there did not appear to be a relationship between gender and academic motivation in the present study.

Findings of this study are consistent with key features of self-determination theory—autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci and Ryan 2000). Of particular note, students' sense of autonomy in their choice of subjects promoted their academic motivation, mentoring was found to support refugee adolescents' academic motivation by fostering a sense of competence, and positive social and academic relationships are vital for refugee adolescents' academic motivation.

All three refugee adolescent participants expressed determination to persevere in their studies despite the challenges each has faced in their resettlement and during the Covid pandemic. The young people's resilience and the factors that promoted their academic motivation are consistent with findings of research in Norway (Lynnebakke and de Wal Pastoor 2020). Through semi-structured interviews with refugee students in three Norwegian upper secondary schools, the researchers found that their aspirations and educational resilience were motivated in the main by a desire for economic security and stability, a sense of responsibility for significant others, praise from teachers, a desire to contribute to society, and personal development (Lynnebakke and de Wal Pastoor 2020). The researchers noted, however, that levels of motivation can vary over time and that previous trauma can make it hard-to-sustain motivation (Lynnebakke and de Wal Pastoor 2020).

4.1 | Implications for Policy and Practice

The provision of education for refugee adolescents is receiving increasing attention with growth in contemporary research (Baak et al. 2023; McBride et al. 2018; UNICEF 2018), guidance to education services issued by the UK government (gov.uk, September 28, 2022), and support by charities such as Refugee Education UK and the Bell Foundation. It is hoped that research on academic motivation in refugee adolescents in the UK will offer education services evidence-based insights that could help them to develop strategies for promoting refugee adolescents' academic motivation and mitigating demotivation. Further research on academic motivation in refugee adolescents is needed to bridge this gap. The finding that refugee adolescent participants were demotivated by negative experiences with teachers and key informants' observations that refugee adolescents' individuality and specific educational needs have, at times, been overlooked warrant attention and consideration by education services. Research has shown that teachers play a critical

role in refugee adolescents' academic acculturation (Bartlett et al. 2017) and that some teachers lack understanding about refugee adolescents' needs (UNICEF 2018). In their study of socio-ecological factors that support the education of unaccompanied and separated Palestinian children in Greece, Aleghfeli and Nag (2024) found that young people are better able to navigate and negotiate education with the help of supportive teachers. A study of unaccompanied and separated Palestinian children at United Nations Relief and Works Agency schools in Jordan found that positive teacher-student relations had a promotive effect on achievement (Aleghfeli 2023) and on reading literacy (Aleghfeli 2024).

Education services may consider implementing professional development training such as the Including Children Affected by Migration (ICAM) Programme developed in Italy (ICAM n.d.). Educators may also consider adopting a culturally responsive pedagogy that recognises individual students' social identities, backgrounds, experiences and learning styles (Bennouna et al. 2021). It is recognised, however, that while many educators are keen to introduce new initiatives to support students, their efforts may be limited by resource constraints. In this real-world context, educators may consider engendering shifts in the approaches taken with refugee pupils, such as employing radical empathy, a reflective practice that has been found to transform the experiences of refugee students at some schools in Australia (Sellars and Imig 2021). Other effective approaches for supporting refugee students include creating a welcoming environment (Furman 2021), peer scaffolding, and drawing on the expertise of EAL teachers to enhance the ability of subject teachers to support refugee students (Prentice 2022; Prentice and Ott 2021). In addition, schools could adopt an asset-based view of refugee students whereby their existing language, knowledge, experience and skills are recognised and valued as strengths, rather than taking a deficit-based view that focuses on their limited proficiency in the English language (Câmara 2024; Prentice 2023). These shifts have been shown to foster a more supportive educational experience for refugee students and may, in turn, positively affect their academic motivation.

4.2 | Limitations

The authors acknowledge a selection bias in the recruitment of refugee adolescent participants in this study, which excluded vulnerable and younger individuals as required by necessary safeguarding measures. However, this was balanced to some extent by the inclusion of key informant participants who had supported refugee adolescents with a broad range of ages, backgrounds, and circumstances.

4.3 | Implications for Further Research

Findings of the present study could serve as a springboard for further research to explore academic motivation in refugee adolescents in the UK. Quantitative research with a validated questionnaire, such as the Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al. 1992) translated into participants' first languages, could extend the research to a broader and larger sample, including younger participants. Stratification of data may also help to

ascertain whether certain aspects of refugee adolescents' backgrounds affect their academic motivation, such as being accompanied or unaccompanied by family, having previous experience of education, coming from a rural or urban environment, or having parents who are literate. Such research could further help educators to provide suitable, specific support to individual refugee adolescents.

5 | Concluding Remarks

The study reported here is the first to investigate the experiences and perceptions of academic motivation in refugee adolescents settled in the UK and contributes to the growing body of research examining the academic experiences of refugee adolescents. The findings of this study provide insights into factors that may promote or compromise refugee adolescents' academic motivation. Of particular note, positive social and academic relationships were found to be motivating, whereas instability in refugee adolescents' lives and negative experiences with teachers were demotivating. The findings also highlight the importance of recognising refugee adolescents' individuality and that their unique characteristics inform their educational needs and academic motivation. This study may serve as a useful basis for further investigations of academic motivation in refugee adolescents. It is hoped that insights from this and future research will help in the development of evidence-based strategies for supporting refugee adolescents' academic motivation and for mitigating demotivation.

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Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the authors' College of Psychology Research Ethics Committee at Birmingham City University, reference number PSY_MScSept_Mar23_006.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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