

ECDE research brief



My Experience as a Peer Researcher with the Enabling Early Child Development in Ealing (ECDE) Project

Juliet Manufor, Family Lives

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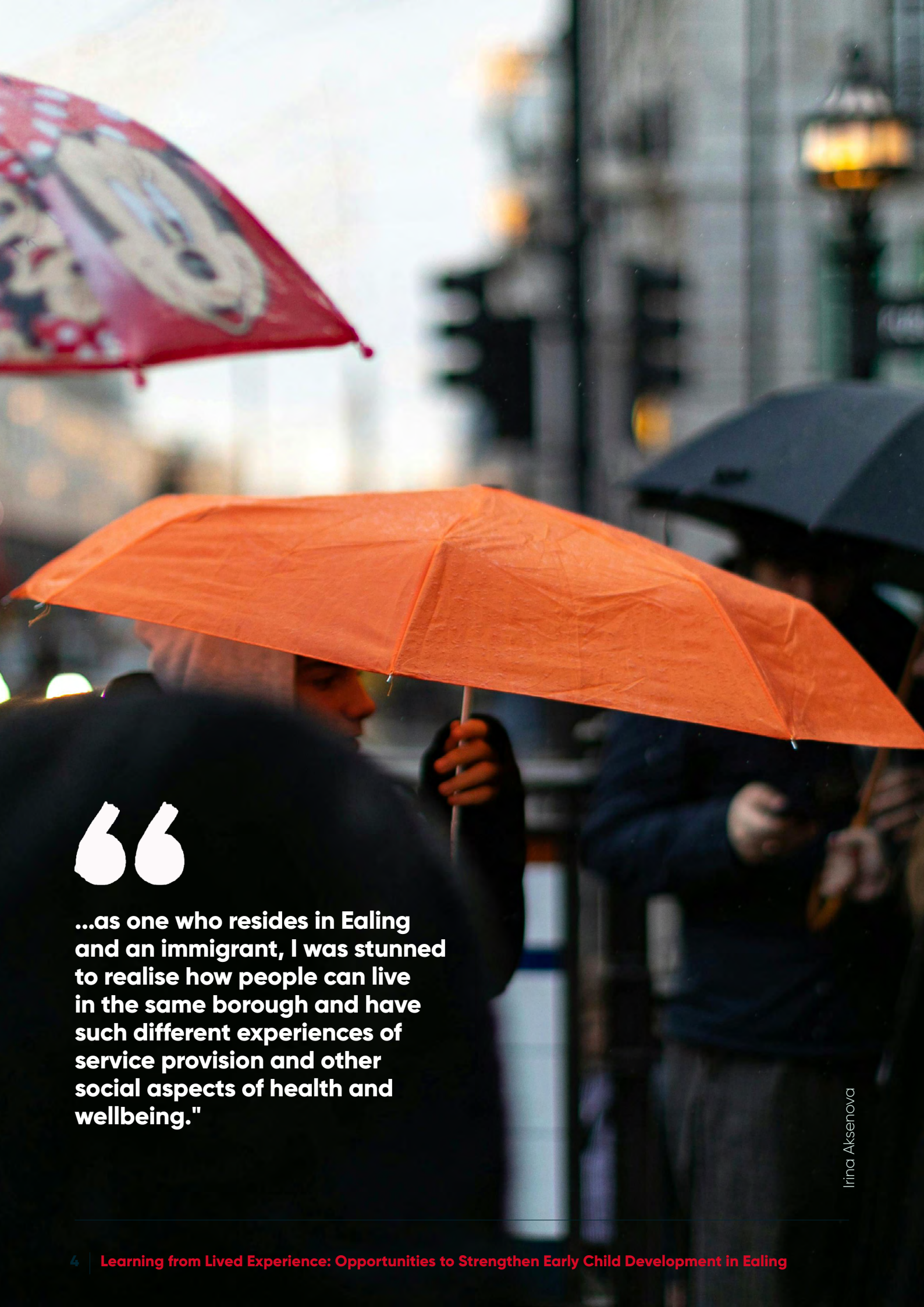


Peer research is a participatory research method where individuals with lived experience of the issues being investigated participate or lead research in their own communities. This method can be powerful in creating an opportunity for a well-rounded and thought-through needs assessments because of its centring of the groups/individuals affected which can lead to better decision making on the issues that most affect them.¹

This research method can help to increase understanding of the social and economic complexities that enable health behaviours within individuals and families. It can enable a theory of change that can be used to effectively articulate processes such as interventions and evaluation that can facilitate desired outcomes for the community. The integration of community members in community-based research initiatives allows for the expertise of lived-experience to be incorporated which helps enhance data quality, and also promotes local capacity building.²

Participating in the ECDE project

I was thrilled when the opportunity to work on the Enabling Early Childhood Development in Ealing (ECDE) project as a peer researcher came my way through my volunteering role with Family Lives. As one who resides in Ealing and passionate about health promotion and public health, about diversity and inclusion, being a part of ECDE was an opportunity to be a part of a change making process. The ECDE project explored the enablers and barriers for supporting early childhood development, how families from diverse backgrounds understand early childhood development and how it shapes their caring and service seeking practices.



“

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Irina Aksenova

I found the role intriguing and challenging at the same time. The opportunity to work on a project that aims to provide inclusivity in service provision so that every child is given the 'best start' in life, is a privilege to me, and I loved every bit of it. It was challenging having to balance out my time with my other job to be able to fully commit myself in this role. It was also challenging having to listen to people's traumatic experiences and going through the emotional labour not to be affected by it.

But in the end, I found it so fulfilling and rewarding. I have learnt a lot from the incredible team of researchers I worked with on this project especially Tabitha Hrynich who took her time to thoroughly induct me and valued my contributions. She also offered me a weekly mentoring session where I had the opportunity to learn more about the project and all aspects of carrying out a research activity. I also used our session to talk to Tabitha about another research project I was involved in at the time (The Living Roots), and she was generous enough to offer me some coaching, her support and guidance with that too. My roles in the project included making contacts with local women's organisations, and co-facilitating focus groups.

Conducting the research

I enjoyed meeting the locals who participated in the research and listening to the stories they shared and their experiences during focus groups which I always looked forward to. Focus group sessions normally started with an introduction, followed by an icebreaker game, and then an arts activity called River of Life where participants drew their rivers representing their experiences of having and raising young children in Ealing with symbols only.



For the final stage, participants were split into groups (usually two) facilitated by the researchers to share their stories through their drawings, taking turns to present to the group, and then having a discuss with each other.

I was most proud of myself at the data validation event we held to share back our findings with the community. I worked with the whole team to make sure that the event was a success, and more so, proud that I read one of the vignettes we developed, which represented an anonymised composite of the stories we heard from parents and carers. There were council policy makers, and individuals from the council public health team, and also various services, representatives from community organisations, and also some parents and carers who participated in the research at the event. We also had an arts activity set up for any children that came along. It was fulfilling to see the council policy makers in particular take every theme that was presented seriously and discuss what next steps should be. Regarding the findings, as one who resides in Ealing and an immigrant, I was stunned to realise how people can live in the same borough and have such different experiences of service provision and other social aspects of health and wellbeing.

The value of peer research in ECDE

My involvement in this project as a peer researcher helped me to see the important role representation and modelling play in helping to achieve inclusivity in health. Having participated in two projects (ECDE Project, and The Living Roots Project), I witnessed first-hand how peer research provides a less intimidating environment for participants and facilitates a more open and honest discussion of needs. It is apparent that complete health cannot be achieved without an enabling environment. At every focus group, I noticed how relaxed and comfortable people were, seeing me as one of them, and they were able to share their experience comfortably. At one of the focus group sessions, a participant said to me when he was talking about his child starting reception and how he felt that because of his son's delayed speech, he was being treated differently from the other children. He turned to me and said **'You live in Ealing? Maybe you live at the other side and the schools are better'**. I shared my experience about the school my two children went to and of a friend who had a similar experience to his.

We both concluded that there's a need for teachers who are trained in early child development in our local schools, who are skilled to work with pupils with different developmental needs. In that moment, I realised how important increasing the legitimacy of lived experience as a form of evidence is, and how it can help in achieving an equitable community.¹

Opportunities for growing peer research

I believe my experience further demonstrates there is a need for local authorities and research institutions to create more opportunities for peer research training and roles. Institutionalising peer research, such as for example, having a team that works to train and support peer researchers on an ongoing basis embedded in local authorities, could help in two important ways. First, it can ensure people in the community are directly involved

in researching the issues that affect them and thus provide better quality data. Second, it can also provide employment for local people. Through training and support, peer researchers could become well equipped and able to be fully committed to doing their job. My participation in this project also made me realise how important it is for people to have someone who they can relate to, which helps bridge the power imbalance. **'Why do we have to come, they will ask us questions and we will tell them what we need, but five years, even 10 years later there's no change we have seen!!'**, said one of the participants during one of our focus groups. But another participant added, when I said that I'm also a resident of Ealing, **'Oh, you live here in Ealing? So maybe they will do something this time'**.

This role is now added to my CV, and I am glad to say that it has also brought me an exciting new opportunity for personal growth too. I interviewed for a position as an 'outreach worker' where I was able to demonstrate the skills and experiences I have gained working as a peer researcher on the ECDE project, and explain how they will help me in the role. The purpose is to engage disadvantaged and vulnerable parents to scope and gather their views and provide practical recommendations on how to effectively engage and retain families in accessible relationship support workshops and programmes. I am looking forward to continue to grow my research and engagement skills through this opportunity.

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