Foster care, recognition and transitions to adulthood for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in England and Ireland

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Aims

The article aims to explore the foster care placement for the unaccompanied refugee minors (URM). More specifically the article aims to examine: 1. the role foster carers have in providing emotional, legal and social recognition for URM; and how this potentially support URM in transitions to adulthood.

Methodology

This articles draws on data from two separate studies on URM, one conducted across 4 local authorities (at least one based in Yorkshire and Humber) in England between 2009 and 2011; and one conducted in Ireland in 2012. This article is written based on data deriving from qualitative interviews and focus groups with URM, social workers and foster carers.

In **England** they interviewed 23 foster carers and 21 young people in their care. 7 of the interviewed foster carers were couples, the rest were single women. All the interviewed URM were young men. The interviewed young people were from 7 countries: Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Vietnam and Nigeria. They were between ages 13-18 and have been in the UK between 10 months and 5 years. Most interviewed were in cross cultural placements, though in two cases foster carers and URM came from same ethnic background.

They also conducted 3 focus groups with 19 URM who were no longer in foster care, and who have attended youth groups. 1 group was all female (4 young women) and 2 were all male (15 young men). Most young people in focus groups were ages 15-20. Most young men were from Afghanistan, one was from western Africa and one from Iran. The 4 women were from Eritrea and Ghana.

For analysis software package MAXQDA was used.

In **Ireland** they did focus groups and interviews with 21 young people. 8 females and 3 males between ages 11-19. 9 of the

URM were from Nigeria, and others came from other countries in Africa and Asia (this data is kept anonymous due to small number of URM in Ireland). They have all been in Ireland between 6 months and 7 years. The carers of these participates who were still in foster care also participated (2 male/female couple, 1 male and 11 female). 6 carers said that their country of origin was located in Africa, while the others were from Ireland. For analysis software package QSR NVivo was used.

Key issues

While the research shows that transition into adulthood in North America, Europe and Australia got postponed in a few years, for the young people in care – due to administrative importance of age 18 – this is not the case. The authors argue that studies illustrate how important the social support and good relationships for care leavers at the period of transition from care are.

Unlike their British (or Irish) born peers URM need to acclimatize to life in a new place. The authors suggest that most young people they talked to had positive views of their foster families, but that their experiences are embedded within broader concerns about what would happen when they turn 18, especially for those whose asylum claim hasn’t been processed and whose future, for that reason, is even more uncertain.

Inspired by the ‘theory of recognition’ (Honneth 2012) - according to which recognition of others is principle of social

justice. Honneth discussed three forms of recognition: love, rights, and solidarity. These are crucial if one were to achieve self-confidence (usually attained through affectionate relationships, e.g. with parents, or friends); self-respect (usually achieved through legal recognition, e.g. through one's role as a citizen, or as an individual with human rights. However when people are denied legal status, respect given by social groups becomes crucial as it may compensate for the lack of the legal one), and self-esteem (usually realised when people feel that their contribution is valued). Warming (2015) departs from Honneth's three forms and adapts it to more practical research, thus discussing 'emotional', 'legal' and 'social' recognition.

Emotional recognition – included provision and manifestation of constant care. For the URM who did not have any family members foster families became really important as they offered opportunity to recover from their often very traumatic and tragic pasts. Foster families and URM would often nurture positive practices through 'doing' and 'displaying' family: by focusing construction of family-like relationships, as opposed to biological connectedness.

Legal recognition – included recognition in terms of rights. Even though in relation to emotional and social recognition it was less discussed by the research participants, it was very important. When foster families would stand for the rights of the URM that were in their care, this would also impact and encourage emotional recognition.

Social recognition – included value of one's skills and competences. The social recognition is really important in establishing good relationships between young persons and foster families.

Conclusion

The research concluded that:

1. Speaking more specifically about URM the authors argue that they may potentially face double exclusion: as children in care and as asylum seekers. Foster carers can support URM transition to adulthood through facilitation of three forms of recognition: 'emotional', 'legal' and 'social'. They are best placed to do so because of the nature of their relationship with the young people (unlike social workers, for example, they are not restricted by working hours).
2. Three forms of recognition - 'emotional', 'legal' and 'social' – are related and linked to each other.
3. 'Legal' recognition is really important especially because URM's legal status is uncertain. Foster families helped young people achieve this form of recognition when advocating for their rights whenever they could (e.g. with regard to education).

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