The negotiation of culture in foster care placements for separated refugee and asylum seeking young people in Ireland and England

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Aims

Drawing on the experiences of young people that are unaccompanied and seeking asylum in UK and Ireland, the article aims to examine the significance of ‘culture’ in foster care placements. This is particularly pertinent since placements that are matched culturally are considered to be providing young people with continuity with their cultural identities. The authors set out to examine this assumption from the perspective of

young people.

Methodology

This study is part of a broader study examining the experiences of foster care and placements of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors, and foster families, as well as the views of social workers. In this article, however, the authors focus only on the experiences of young people living in four LA in England and young people living in the Republic of Ireland.

England: the researchers conducted interviews with young men between ages 13-18, which have been in England between 10 months and five years. Except for one all interviews were conducted in English (one person wanted an interpreter). They also conducted focus groups with male and female participants between ages 15-19. The young people originated from 7 countries, but many were from Afghanistan. 4 young people had refugee status and the others had ‘Discretionary Leave to Remain’. All the data collected was analysed using the software package MAXQDA.

Republic of Ireland: the data used in this article derives from 21 face to face interviews with young people (8 female and 13 male, ages 11-19). Except for one all interviews were conducted in English (one person wanted an interpreter). 18 young people lived in foster placements at the time of the interview and have been there between 4 months and 6 years. The other 3 previously lived in foster care placement. 10 of the young people

were from Nigeria. Other 11 came from nine other countries. 15 were Christian and 6 were Muslim. 2 of the young people had refugee status while the others were at different stages of the asylum procedure. All the data collected was analysed using the software package NVivo.

The authors examine the experiences of young people that were placed in ‘cross-cultural’ placement and those of those that were in placements where at least one person was from the same country of origin or shared the same religion as the young person.

Key issues

Young people’s perceptions on the importance of culture:

Young people appreciated placements where efforts were made to maintain some sense of continuity with their previous lives. This means that in young people’s view what really mattered was not if the placements were cross cultural or matched, but what personality carers had and whether they were respectful of young people’s cultural background. While some young people thought carers had an important role in helping them secure that ‘cultural continuity’, others thought it was their own responsibility.

Communication and language:

Relationships with foster families who did not speak the same language of the young person were sometimes more challenging

because of the language barriers. Despite this some young people preferred families that only spoke English as they wanted to learn the language fats. The communication though went beyond language and some research participants talked about importance of other means to communicate, such as eye contact, for example. These other means were often very cultural.

Food:

Food played a crucial role in how young people felt welcomed and included, which ultimately shaped their sense of belonging. When everything is unknown and uncertain, especially at the initial stages of one's arrival into a family, food could serve as a 'refuge' in time of transition. There are all sorts of challenges involved in food practices, for example if young people are fasting during Ramadan, or eat only Halal food, but most of the time foster carers and young people managed to find ways to deal with this. Shopping for food together and encouraging young people to cook their own food proved to be good ways of addressing some difficulties

Conclusion

The authors concluded that:

1. Young people thought it was important to maintain cultural connections with place of their origin, but means to achieve this were not only through 'matching placements', that considered only religion and nationality.

2. Young people’s opinions on issues relating to culture were defined by their personal experiences of placements and negotiation of ‘culture’ within them.
3. Cultural identities and processes should be viewed as processes that are produced through social interactions and relationships which themselves are set in place and time, hence there is nothing ‘natural’ about culture. In relation to this, continuity in terms of maintaining elements of the past practices, may also incorporate change.
4. Practitioners need to implement individualized approach in order to understand whether an individual needs ‘matched’ or ‘cross-cultural’ placement.
5. Most young people attributed the greatest importance to relationships they developed with foster families. Issues relating to ‘culture’ and/or ‘identity’ are only part of those relationships.

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