Hosting Strangers: hospitality and family practices in fostering unaccompanied refugee young people

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Aims

The aim of this research was to identify good practice through the experiences of young unaccompanied asylum seeking people and foster carers. They did so through learning about the encounter between the two, the process of placement, the needs of young people and support foster carers were receiving.

Methodology

The research took place in 2009-2010 in four LAs that could not be identified due to anonymity issues (the author has been contacted and confirmed that one of the LA is based in Yorkshire and Humber).

They used several methods.

Quantitative:

1. A census from four LAs on the profile of unaccompanied minors living in those LAs. It included information on 2113 individuals.
2. A postal survey with 133 foster carers, all anonymous, sent to foster carers by Children's Services.

Qualitative:

1. 2 focus groups with young men and 1 focus group with young women, aged 15-20, who used to live with foster carers, but no longer do so.
2. 4 focus groups with social workers
3. 4 interviews with managers of children's asylum teams
4. 23 interviews with foster carers

23 foster carers that were interviewed were drawn from a postal survey sample. 7 were interviewed as couples, while others were one-to-one interviews with female foster carers.

5. 21 interviews with young people in their care (2 refused to be interviewed)

The young people interviewed were all male, between 13-18 years old and have been in the UK between 10 months and 5 years. They have come from seven different countries. Four young people had refugee status, and 17 had ‘Discretionary Leave to Remain’.

Key issues

Drawing on theories of hospitality and kinship, the author identified 3 models within which relationships between young people and foster carers fell into:

1. Like-family – tight and close relationships that would most likely last beyond placement period.
2. Guests – while there is a lot of mutual respect within this model, the bonds between the two isn’t tight and interests of the two are very different.
3. Lodgers – the relationships were at times tense and there was clear distance between the foster carers and the young people.

The author mentions to take into consideration that those who agreed to be interviewed most likely had positive experiences of placement/hosting (namely like-family and Guests categories). It was when they discussed past placements that also some more negative encounters were discussed.

Then the author suggests that the relationships between foster carers and young people developed gradually, and/or at certain ‘key moments’. She identifies acts of hospitality and family

practices that helped in developing relationships:

1. Threshold moments – initial moments of hospitality were crucial in developing positive relationships only at the early stages. For relationships to be truly meaningful it was important to move beyond hospitality towards family-like relationships.
2. Mastery of the house – Young people often want to be active members within households and allowing them to contribute to activities around the household or to feel free (to watch tv, for example, or to access food) can only help develop positive relationships. This means that degree of flexibility is necessary on behalf of foster carers in terms of organization and control they keep over their household. Household activities, the article argues, were also defined by regulations and guidelines of child services (for example young people who wanted to share a room could not do so), especially since these were very different to what they were previously used to.
3. Trust, duty and care – Trust is an important aspect of any relationships especially those that involve young people whose trust has potentially been betrayed so many times before arrival in the UK because of the circumstances they found themselves in. Caring for the young people and showing them that foster carers were on their side (even when foster carers did not always believe in all the details of young people’s stories) proved to be very important in establishing healthy relationships, especially as then young people felt that foster carers were motivated by care (for

the young people) and not by duty (to care).

Conclusion

While this research did not examine other than foster care placement options, the author suggests that she was not able to identify issues of isolation, poor living conditions or difficulties in accessing services, all of which are more present in literature that examines other placement options for unaccompanied minors.

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