Identities on the move: the integration experiences of Somali refugee and asylum seeker young people

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Aims

Most research about refugees and asylum seekers is about adults. This research aimed to address young asylum seekers' identities and affiliations.

Methodology

A multi-method research design combining a quantitative in-depth survey of 3313 young people [years 7, 9, 11] in schools and qualitative research in Sheffield, UK and Aarhus, Denmark including participant observation, interviews with Somalis, interviews with stakeholders, a web forum and art workshops.

Key issues

Somali children gain their understanding of what it means to be Somali from their families and communities. Forced mobility means the identity ‘Muslim’ becomes the most important way for many young Somali people to define who they are. Young people are wary of claiming a British identity as it is implicitly still imagined as a white identity. Community space is important to define identities and to give security to feel belonging to the nation. Integration policies which stress national identity may legitimise negative attitudes towards migrants and their cultures. Somali children [and their parents] receive very limited support at school to learn English. Intercultural differences are emerging between generations. Young people commonly feel their parents do not understand their experiences of trying to integrate. A crisis of masculinity and lack of male mentors is contributing to a high incidence of youth offending. There is an emerging – but hidden – culture of smoking and drinking among Somali young people which has implications for the development of health education initiatives.

Conclusions

A sense of ‘belonging’ in a country develops where a community has a sense of security and space to define its own identity beyond or alongside narrow prescriptions of national identity.

Recommendations

Recommendations are aimed at national integration and education policies and local groups. The key recommendation is that policies to support Somali young people to integrate must enable them to retain and develop a strong sense of their own cultural identity and heritage, while also supporting them to access education, services and similar life opportunities to the rest of the population. Funding is needed to develop educational support such as Somali community homework clubs. ‘Meaningful contact’ between Somali and white majority groups should be promoted.

Migrant Group
Asylum seekers
Refugees
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Children and young people
Community cohesion
Integration
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South Yorkshire
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