Developing identity: Somali children in Sheffield

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Aims

The article reports on research to explore the complex influences on young Somali refugee and asylums seekers' identity formations in different geographical sites and according to different arrival scenarios.

Methodology

Research in Sheffield and Aarhus, Denmark included a survey and interviews.

Key issues

The number of Somalis in the UK is difficult to estimate due to mixed forms of migration and limitations of data collection. Young people countered the stigma of 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' labels by emphasising their pride in Somalia. Most left

when they were young or were born on the move; knowledge of Somalia is gained from family, friends or media. There was a general wariness about publicly claiming a British identity in case it was seen as a rejection of Somali heritage, or because it is imagined as a white identity. This contrasted with the experience in Denmark which has different reception policies. Many of the young Somalis in Denmark had encountered significant experiences of discrimination, which may contribute to secondary migration once they have a European passport. Some of those in Sheffield described experiences of racism, but this was countered by a broader perception of safety and trust. Feelings of security are important to belonging to a nation. Children tend to learn the language of the settlement country quickly and may take on responsibilities by assuming a role of family interpreter. The issue of language is often a cause of intergenerational tensions. Differences in language spoken at home or at school could contribute to relative underachievement of Somali children.

Conclusions

Place or context is important in shaping how individuals develop and perform their own identities and how they are understood by others. 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

Policies that are implemented to support Somali young people to integrate into the UK 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.

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