

Unaccompanied young man being interviewed by a Refugee Council advice worker

Social work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people

by Ravi Kohli

In the UK there are currently some 5,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people who are being looked after or supported by local authorities.¹

Many of them are cared for by social workers who are legally obliged to ensure that they receive the same quality of care and protection that indigenous young people with similar needs would receive. In some respects these young people present a fresh version of familiar challenges and dilemmas for social workers. Separation and loss are fundamental parts of any unaccompanied child's story, as for many young people that social workers care for. Providing care and protection to unaccompanied asylum seekers from overseas, however, presents a number of additional, different challenges.

Many of them have faced, and still face, great uncertainties: in relation to their past, often as suddenly uprooted migrants; in the present, as young people who may not always receive high quality substitute care; and in the future, as asylum applicants waiting to hear about their bid for citizenship. They have to survive in an

unfamiliar context, with strange habits, rules, language and customs. Their families may have sent them far away to escape danger, leaving the young people with a complex and sometimes burdensome message about what their families think about them. The young people may or may not know what they have to do for themselves. The stages of arrival, settlement and achieving citizenship may test their resilience in profound ways as they integrate into new environments and move away from the old.

Achieving citizenship is not enough. They may, like other migrants, have been urged by their families to succeed academically and financially. Unlike economic migrants, however, their asylum claims may be jeopardised by revealing any economic sub-text to their flight. They may have learned to present the simplest, most acceptable version of their reasons for flight and thus may become silent about the complex circumstances of

their departure. Social workers need to ask themselves:

- How can we learn about an unaccompanied asylum seeker's life before separation?
- How should we deal with silence?
- How can we meet the needs of unaccompanied minors for a family, a social network, health care, education and a durable sense of self worth?
- Do we know enough concerning the legal, political and research issues related to refugees?
- How can we plan for resettlement, reunification with families of origin, or, where necessary, repatriation?

Current evidence suggests that the chronic uncertainty about getting refugee status so dominates the lives of unaccompanied young people that it undermines their confidence about the future.² Social workers familiar with the need to think about threats of social exclusion for young people leaving care are faced with the additional challenge of denial of citizenship for at least some of their unaccompanied young people.

To assess how social workers are responding to these challenges, I interviewed 35 local authority social workers working within four rural and urban Social Services departments in the UK. Interviewees were asked to describe and analyse their practice in relation to one unaccompanied asylum seeker in their care. The young people they chose to discuss come from Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Kosovo and Albania. Their ages range from 14 years to 18 years, with an average age of just under 16 years. Two thirds are male, reflecting a general trend for boys, rather than girls, to seek asylum in Britain. The vast majority have been granted temporary admission while their claims are examined. Only one child in four actually gains leave to remain.

Social workers offer threads of connection

Indigenous young people of concern to social workers usually suffer from a harmful family environment and/or a materially impoverished context. However, for many of the unaccompanied minors coming to the UK, it is chronic civil unrest that has threatened them, not material or emotional deprivation.

Silence

What sense do the young people make of being sent so far away from harm, and home? I found that few social workers know. This is not because they have not asked the child but because they do not get an answer. Young people reject attempts to engage them in life story work. Many do not know where their families are

UNHCR
Armenia/Mariam
Galstyan, aged 10

and have no contact with them. These asylum seekers, unlike indigenous young people, do not provide social workers with parental names and dates of birth, family composition and precise addresses or telephone numbers for family members. Social workers are aware of the young people's reluctance to talk to them as authority figures and understand their fear that disclosure could result in expulsion. Silence can be a predominant feature of their relationship with the social worker. Trust comes slowly, sometimes over years. Information emerges in dribs and drabs. Social workers are aware of the costs and benefits of silence. Silence brings security; leaks mean danger. But silence can also be a burden. Through having been sent to safety, the child may feel discarded. And being sent away while the family remains may leave the child deeply worried about the family's well-being – and guilty at having reached safety.

The social workers respond to silence in different ways. Many wait, knowing the importance of balancing what to ask with how to ask and when to ask. Despite a reluctance to act as immigration officers, others worry about the authenticity of a child's claim if silence is a predominant feature.

Any migrant, whether economic or political, faces a dilemma in balancing integration into the host society with 'disintegration' from the society left behind. Social workers offer threads of connection. For example, they pursue information about missing family members via the Red Cross tracing service (if the child consents). They take the young people to eat

'home food' in restaurants. They provide dual language dictionaries and cookbooks, prayer mats and copies of the Koran and long-distance phonecards. They help young people make contact with same-

S is a 16 year old Ethiopian boy whose father was politically active in opposition to the Ethiopian government. One day S's house was attacked by government soldiers. His father was shot in the neck and died. His mother committed suicide on the same day. S escaped. The house was ransacked. An aunt helped to get him out of the country. On arrival in the UK he was referred by Immigration to Social Services. After living for a while in a young people's home he was diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder for which he received effective help from the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. He has recently moved on to independent living.

Described as a humorous and friendly young man, he still suffers from the trauma of his pre-flight experiences. On a recent visit, his social worker visited him in his new flat and asked about an empty photo frame on the mantelpiece in the front room. S said that one day he hoped to get a photograph of his mother and father. Then the frame would be filled with their picture.

culture organisations. They work closely with key workers or foster carers who offer not just consistency and regularity of contact but who frequently provide the basics of care for the young people.

Resilience, vulnerability and living with uncertainty

Social workers interviewed report that for both practical and sentimental reasons they enjoy their work with unaccompanied young people more

'no nation now but the imagination'

Caribbean poet Derek Walcott



than they do with UK young people. These young people seem to offer a degree of refreshing hope in comparison to the more dour set of challenges set by local young people.

Asylum-seekers are seen as robust, self-motivated and committed to making the best of their circumstances. They want to do well educationally and are caring and careful. Once settled in placements, they make good, reliable and affectionate relationships. There are unaccompanied young people who shout for what they need, lose sleep, break things that belong to them and put relationships and laws to the test but they are a minority. For the majority of young people episodes of acute distress, and resultant medical and psychotherapeutic interventions, are rare. This worries some social workers who fear this cloak of civility masks inner distress at the uncertainty in their lives.

In fact – and surprisingly given the level of complexity used by some practitioners in thinking about these young people – practicality also sometimes overrides their own need to access research in relation to refugees, or training, or specialist supervision, consultation and networking. Many of them work in the absence of detailed policy related to unaccompanied young people.³ Instead they use their own personal and professional experiences to give shape to their practice. Sometimes this narrow reliance on one's own resources feels insufficient, particularly for the minority of workers who have helped to develop practice guidelines within their agencies. Many appear to plough a lonely, if effective, furrow.

Repatriation, reunification and rehabilitation

None of the young people in the research group has achieved refugee status. Some have been given Exceptional Leave to Remain on humanitarian grounds. Others have just begun the application process. Nevertheless, all the workers interviewed insist that the young people do not want repatriation; they long for refugee status. Their dogged determination to 'get an education'

and to become 'somebody' is emphasised by those young people who have been in the UK for a number of years.

Perhaps because they wish the best for the young people themselves, very few social workers anticipate the consequences of repatriation. However, young asylum seekers approaching adulthood are, unlike their indigenous peers, at risk not just of social exclusion as they leave care but also of having citizenship denied to them. I concluded my interviews with social

K, a 17 year old, had been separated from her family in Africa for six years when, out of the blue, she received a letter from her father. The social worker explained:

When I met her the following week, I said, "if you'd like to share the letter with me, I'd like to see it". "I don't have it," she said. "I've burned it". It turned out that her father had written a bit about himself. He is now married and has two young children, one of whom is called K after her. It's quite incredible the emotional impact something like that has on how she feels, separated from him. He has another K there now, and he said that he had not been able to make contact with her before because of the situation in her home country.

After all this, she said to me, "But I've written him a letter anyway – do you want to see it?" When she showed me the letter I was practically moved to tears. She said over and over in the letter: "I love you so much. There's not one day that goes by that I don't think about you, and you'll always be my dad, no matter what".

workers by asking them if they knew with whom young people in their case-load would have a sense of connection when they have grown up. The answer is far from clear.

Conclusion

Survival for the young people means dealing with uncertainty in a robust fashion. For social workers good practice means finding a balance between the universal and specific needs of their charges. It means taking a sensitive approach to their burdens, neither rushing for information, nor denying its long-term importance. Good practice also means providing connections at a level that is tolerable and meaningful for each individual child. Often social workers work alone, without the benefits of clear guidance from policy or research. Their potential to sustain good practice by using a web of connections rather than relying on solitary efforts has yet to be exploited. Similarly the potential of each child to reconnect with his/her family, safe in the knowledge they have actually gained asylum, is yet to be fulfilled.

Ravi Kohli works at Middlesex University. His research interests focus on the impact of diversity on social work practice. He would be interested in hearing from other researchers studying the lives of young asylum seekers in western industrialised nations. Email: r.kohli@mdx.ac.uk

1. Audit Commission 2000 *Another Country – implementing dispersal under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999*, The Stationery Officer. Stone R *Young people first and foremost: meeting the needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people* Barnardo's, London, 2000. The young people come from many countries, with large representations from former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, China, Iraq and Angola. Other countries include Albania, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Iran, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Romania. They are primarily located in London and elsewhere in southern England where major ports of entry are located.

2. Russell S *Most vulnerable of all. The treatment of unaccompanied refugee young people in the UK*. Amnesty International, 1999.

3. The Department of Health keeps no details of the type and quality of care received by unaccompanied minors, nor a central register of the number of cases being dealt with by local authorities. Practice guidance is available (*Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children – A practice guide/training pack*, Department of Health, 1995) but requires updating, and national dissemination and promotion.