

Young people and relations of power

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Young forced migrants in London are challenging – and seeking to renegotiate – existing power relations.

For young people who come to the UK seeking asylum, their movement and access to security and opportunity are determined by the state, its legislation and institutional practice. Their attempts to carry on with life and to build a future are in defiance of an immigration framework designed to be punitive in order to discourage migration and placate sections of public opinion. For unaccompanied asylum seekers in particular there is a shortage of political bodies to represent them, leaving them to organise and engage with power structures themselves. The Brighter Futures youth group is a self-advocacy group of unaccompanied asylum seekers and refugees united by a commitment to improve the quality of life for their peers by engaging with policymakers and challenging – and changing – policies directly affecting their lives.

Brighter Futures regularly invites collaborations with creative arts specialists. The opportunity for self-expression enables young people to communicate beyond their daily realities and reveal their experiences, ideas, fears or dreams. Putting thoughts and reflections in print, as with a recent creative writing project with English Pen, ensures that a narrative of asylum based on lived experience has a reach beyond the project,

informing policy, raising awareness and broadening society's understanding of the 'other'. This is particularly important when policy and services are shaped by those who do not experience the consequences at the point of implementation. Within a safe group environment members are encouraged to debate fiercely. They listen to each other and try to suggest practical solutions

THERE IS A PLACE (excerpt by a member of Brighter Futures youth group)

*There is a place where you can start life
where your first best friend
makes you laugh for the
first time...*

*There is a bench where you
make your first dream
about your future.*

to their problems, to think about how they can create small changes that may have profound effects, and how they can engage with policymakers and service providers whom they often find themselves powerless to challenge.

Understanding that past trauma continues to afflict individuals is critical. While undertaking participatory research, Brighter Futures visited other refugee youth groups to gather information on their experiences of social services. The use of the term 'interview', however, meant that some of the other young people were unwilling to take part, fearing a recreation of the Home Office interview – a distressing part of the asylum process where young people's stories of asylum are picked apart. Similarly, processes which unnecessarily ask young people to revisit past traumas and which place them in the limelight for no other reason than to gather sympathy for a political outcome determined by others can remove their political agency.

In building bridges with officials and others, power dynamics should be levelled and based on people's common humanity rather than being derived from the job title of the state actor or being based upon the immigration status of the young person. This can only happen through an approach which begins with the lived experience – giving legitimacy to participants' experiences of displacement. By creating opportunities that give expression and validity to



April 2012, Sabine Larribeau receives a Brighter Futures Award in recognition of 'advocating for a young refugee's rights' while working with Just for Kids Law. The Brighter Futures youth group launched the Award in order to raise standards in social work practice. Social workers and key workers were nominated, shortlisted and presented with the awards by young refugees and asylum seekers. www.brighterfutureslondon.co.uk/BFA_AboutUs.html

their perspectives, young people are able to carve out a space from which to challenge the norms of their daily reality. They can reclaim their power as young people: full of anger at injustice, pride in their heritage and full of hope for their uncertain futures.

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Shamser Sinha, Lecturer in Sociology at University Campus Suffolk S.Sinha@ucs.ac.uk co-authored (with Les Back, Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths College) the report *A door to the future? the consequences for young migrants of immigration and welfare policy* online at <http://tinyurl.com/eumargins-uk-national-policy> as part of an EU research study titled 'EU Margins: On the Margins of the European Community'.