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The Care of Unaccompanied Minors in Ireland: from Hostel
Accommodation to Family Care.



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Aims of the Presentation

- To examine care provision in Ireland: the move from hostel care to foster care
- To briefly look at the use of residential care
- To explore foster care in more detail
- To explore relationship building in context.

Irish Context

- History of emigration - ‘unaccompanied minors’ leaving Ireland
- Arrival of unaccompanied minors:
 - First record – 1996
 - Increasing numbers between then and 2001; decline thereafter.
- The Irish care system
 - Care of unaccompanied minors:
 - Limited use of residential care / foster care and supported lodgings
 - Predominately hostel care until end of 2010

Study Context, Methodology & Participants

- Context: Hostel provision and move to 'equity of care'
- Methodology: Primarily qualitative
 - Face-to-face interviews
 - Telephone interviews
 - Focus group
- 69 Participants
 - 21 Young people, 16 carers and 32 stakeholders

Move from Hostel Care to Foster Care – ‘equity of care’

- Why the change occurred
- The new policy/practice:
 - Opportunities
 - Challenges during transition period
- Current system:
 - Mix of *Residential Care at reception* and *Foster Care / Supported Lodgings* in medium-longer term
 - Benefits of this mixed model of care
 - Challenges

Residential: shared experiences:

They find that ... they're not completely on their own even though the other person they're living with may be speaking a different language and be from a different country, but there's a shared experience in that they're all in Ireland, can't be in their own place, away from family.

Residential: not a normal place:

It's not a normal place to be like if you get me... You're not really living in a stable place.. Like, it's great like to live there but... people come in and go and staff changes everyday ... For me, at first it was like 'Ahh my God', today you're seeing this person and the next it's another people ...

Leaving residential care:

I was happy to finally find a family but I was also sad to leave, to leave the people I'd been living with ... I really got to know them and I liked them. So it was a happy and a sad moment.

Living in a Family Placement

- From residential care to foster care – Transitioning and Settling in
- Family care:
 - Positive aspects
 - Appreciated efforts made by carers; being treated like family; ‘listening’, ‘encouraging’, ‘being there’; advocating
 - General challenges relating to:
 - Location of placements; food; rules; personality clashes; composition of family; not living with family; adolescence?

Feeling part of the family:

They gave me a room and ... they did everything that my family did for me basically and ... they brought me to their daughter's wedding so they said the family has to go to a wedding so you're part of our family so you have to come with us ... so basically, you know, they count me as their family so I felt like I'm part of this family .. I will never forget, never.

Providing safety:

Make sure ... keep you safe. Like ... come in before dark ... in case bad people come and take you and stuff like that.

Family composition:

He wasn't always there; he was always driving [for work]. It was kind of like ... lady's thing. The woman, the mum, and the two kids. And I couldn't relate to them ... I was always in the room and I just did my thing.

Foster carer is not your Mum:

Like if it's your mum, you know, she understands every single thing about you, she knows you inside out 'cause she's your mum and you know there are some things your foster carer can't do for you like your mom can do for you.

Family Placements in Context: Diversity & Uncertainty

- Culture and Diversity
 - Placements with ethnic minority carers
 - Placements with Irish carers
- Uncertainty
 - Impact of asylum seeking
 - Silence and secrecy
 - Transitioning from family care

Placement with carer of same nationality:

You can talk about stuff about Nigeria and stuff ... she has like more experience than I do, you know, in things about Nigeria and stuff like, I can learn stuff off her yeah and, um, we speak the same language.

Emphasising care, not ethnicity:

To me I cannot say I prefer Irish or African. If they're being nice to me, I stay with them.

Stakeholder

Fear of deportation:

Terrifying, heartbreaking, to even think that I could lose one of my kids, they are my kids. As I said, the Irish government gave me these kids to look after, but they didn't expect me to fall in love with them and to become part of the family in a very short period of time.

Carer

Adult asylum seeker accommodation:

Nobody will come to you, even if you're sick, nobody will come to your room to ask you are you OK. Even if they didn't see you for the whole day, nobody cares... I just sit in my room and I cry and cry and cry and cry and cry.

Relationship Building in Foster Care

- Relationships at the heart of foster care?
- Challenges in relation to unaccompanied minors:
 - General challenges associated with relationship building for the general population of children in care
 - Time spent in residential care
 - Age of entry into foster care
 - Cultural differences (See Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2014)
 - Silence, secrecy & mistrust (See Kohli 2006b; Ní Raghallaigh 2013b;)
 - The asylum process and threat of deportation
 - Turning 18: 'direct provision' system

How can relationships be built in this context?

- Need carers who
 - Are emotionally self aware
 - Provide practical assistance
 - Provide emotional support when sought
 - Treat the young people like their own children
 - Don't try to replace birth families
 - Advocate for the young people
 - Show an interest in their culture
 - Allow silence
 - Can respond to the co-existence of vulnerability and resilience
 - Can respond to young people who want to be 'attached' or 'detached' (Biehal, 2009, drawing on Downes, 1988)

Presence in the context of silence:

We make a point of trying not to delve into their past... What we say to them is, 'look, you know, if there are any issues that come up for you as a result of what happened in your past that you really need to talk to us about, we're here, ... But don't feel that you have to tell us your past'My curious nature would be to ask, 'well, tell me what has brought you to here?' But, in a sense, we feel that we have to respect their need for privacy.

Carer

Normal relationships:

I think it's actually quite a normal, natural relationship, where he can get angry with her. He can behave badly and he'll be forgiven. They won't be [saying] 'take this kid away'. Do you know what I mean? He'll go off up the fields and disappear and act the eejit and the foster carer will be very forgiving.... So there's a normalisation about their family thing

Social Worker

Questions to Ponder

- Is there a tendency to assume that residential care is a second rate care option?
- Is foster care the best option for the particular young person with whom you are working?
- What does care provision (foster care or residential) aim to achieve in the context of the asylum process?
- How can meaningful relationships be built in the context of trust and uncertainty?

Useful readings

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