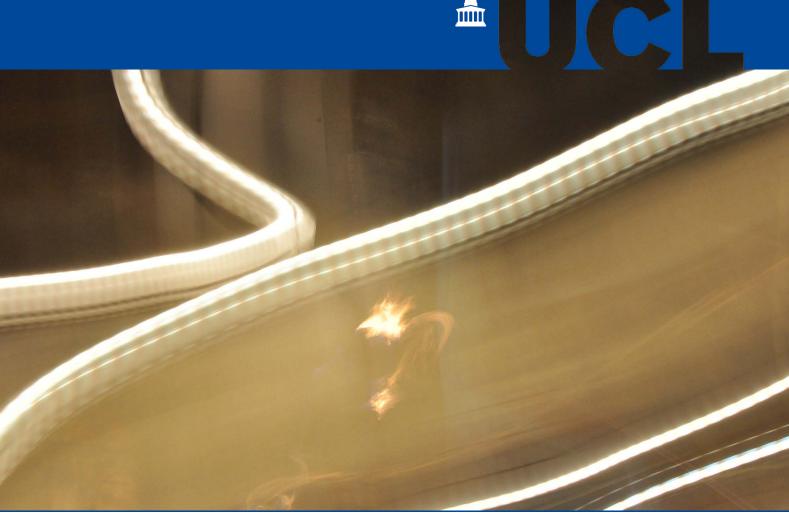# Institute of Education
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A Warm Welcome? Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Networks of Care and Asylum

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In 2015 there was a 56% rise in applications from unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (Home Office 2016), with all indications that numbers of unaccompanied migrant children[1] coming to the UK will continue to rise (Unicef 2016). Until now, there appear to be significant variations in the quality of care and support for unaccompanied children, and conflicting advice and treatment across various institutions and networks (Chase 2013, Connolly 2014, Dorling 2013, Kohli and Mitchell 2007). However, existing research has focused on discrete aspects of these systems e.g. foster care, social work, laws (Wade 2011). There is limited understanding of unaccompanied children's overall negotiations of the lengthy, complex, and often contradictory care and asylum processes in the UK.

Also largely absent in research to date, particularly in the Minority World, is attention to the care that unaccompanied migrant children provide for other children and adults, both those they meet on migration journeys and transnational family members. Yet, there are indications that children's caring practices may be crucial to navigating and surviving precarious migration journeys, as well as immigration processes and settlement in 'host countries', with separated migrant children in the UK providing an important source of information and support for others (Crafter and Rosen forthcoming, Wells 2011, McGovern and Devine 2015). However, literature on care has largely focused on the care of children by adults (e.g. see De Graeve. K. & Bex 2017), even in the case of unaccompanied children. This is perhaps because care has often been conceptualized and enacted in paternalistic ways (Watson et al. 2004) but also because dominant Western understandings and structuring of childhood are based on assumptions that children should be cared for, rather than do the caring (Rosen and Newberry 2018).

As a result, little is known about the ways that unaccompanied children's care networks are formed and maintained. There is also limited understanding of how children's caring practices are understood and viewed by these children as well as the (quasi) professionals who are charged with their care and immigration status determinations in the UK. Despite the invisibility of unaccompanied children's caring practices in most research to date, we suggest that they have potentially significant implications for asylum claims and the ways in which the state exercises (or not) its responsibilities to ensure adequate provision for unaccompanied migrant children under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Further, in contexts of limited resources, marginalization and discrimination (Rosen and Crafter in review, Hopkins and Hill 2010), and extreme precarity (Chase 2013), unaccompanied children's caring practices may be significantly constrained with implications for both well-being and equality.

Against this backdrop, *A Warm Welcome?* sought to investigate unaccompanied children's experiences of care, and caring for others, as they navigate the labyrinthine asylum-welfare nexus in the UK.

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[1] Broadly speaking, the term 'unaccompanied migrant children' refers to people under 18 who migrate without their *primary* adult guardian (e.g. parent), and who may be entitled to seek asylum although not all do so. Terminology is contested however, given its significant consequences (Rosen forthcoming).

Methodology

As a small-scale, exploratory case study (Yin 2003), this pilot project took a broad and iterative approach aiming at refining research questions, exploring research approaches, and suggesting emerging themes for exploration in a fuller study. Specific objectives were to:

(i)   Begin mapping the sites and processes in which unaccompanied children build and engage with institutional, civil society and family/peer networks of care

(ii)   Explore perspectives on and experiences of care *of*, and *by*, unaccompanied children

(iii)   Analyse the geo-political contexts of unaccompanied children's experiences of care

(iv)   Begin designing and assessing research methods, and evaluate the methodological feasibility of working with a multi-disciplinary team, including academics, third sector organisations, and (former) unaccompanied children.

The boundaries of the 'case' were broad: focusing on unaccompanied children and those involved in the asylum-welfare nexus in England. This was to allow for convenience sampling, supported by 'snowballing' techniques, but also to enable relationship building with potential third sector partners. Every effort was made to recruit participants from the widest possible variety of disciplines/professions and sites, albeit that this was clearly a small, non-representative study. This does not reduce the reliability of such a study, or of 'minor' and partial data more generally (Katz 1996), as it can highlight assumptions, identify emerging concerns, and allow exploration of the conditions of data production and its effects.

Project activities included:

- Three meetings with a multi-disciplinary group focused on sharing state-of-art disciplinary, professional, and practice knowledge to establish strategic issues for investigation.

- 13 semi-structured interviews with adult stakeholders both working and volunteering in a variety of statutory services and voluntary sectors. These included people from third sector organisations (2); social work (3); foster care (2); local authority head of UASC programmes (1); laws (3); police (1); and borders and customs (1). Interviews focused on three key themes: experiences working with unaccompanied children; unaccompanied children's experiences of care and caring; and perspectives on state approaches to unaccompanied children in the UK. Additional topics were explored in relation to the specific disciplinary/professional field/site. For instance, interviews with a private fostering agency representative included questions about the funding mechanisms and relationship with local authority providers.

- Forging links with existing migrant children's organisations / networks (6 in total). Three adult stakeholders from these groups participated in individual interviews (above), but any follow-up meetings were not recorded, as the primary purpose of these activities was to build rapport, as well as refine the research focus and design. An arts-based focus group structure was developed through this consultation process. It was designed to facilitate reflection and conversation amongst unaccompanied children about their understandings of and experiences of care,.

The following section focuses on themes emerging from the semi-structured interviews with adult stakeholders.

Emerging themes

1.   (Non)Profession adults involved with unaccompanied migrant children

Through our research we were able to identify and interview a variety of non-professionals, quasi-professionals, and professionals involved with unaccompanied migrant children. Professionals working with unaccompanied migrant children ranged from those in government and statutory services (e.g. Home Office officials, UK Border and Customs, police, local authority staff including social workers, health workers), to companies (e.g. private foster agencies), quasi professionals (e.g. foster carers), and 'non-professionals' in the voluntary sector (e.g. migrant youth organisations, legal charities promoting the rights of children and advocacy organisations). There were also a number of professionals working in a voluntary capacity, some of whom maintained connections with children made in 'The Jungle' in Calais as they entered the UK. Overall, this is indicative of the wide range of adults which unaccompanied children have contact with in the UK as well as the difficulty in categorically imposing either national or professional boundaries around these individuals. In what follows, we outline two key themes emerging in relation to this disparate system of provision for unaccompanied children.

a)   'Cracks' in the system

All participants spoke of their links with other professionals in their work with separated child migrants, as well as between statutory, voluntary and private sectors. Professional networks and linkages across sectors were viewed as a positive ideal. Some local authority workers also noted positive examples of 'joined up working' in practice. In the main, however, participants commented on significant 'cracks' between various provision for unaccompanied children, often with detrimental consequences.

'Cracks' in the system include:

- Conflicting or absent advice for unaccompanied minors;
- Compromised age assessments as a result of minimal involvement from people that 'know' unaccompanied children e.g. foster carers;
- The absence of a care plan from the Local Authority for post-18-year-olds; and
- Disconnects between professionals such as social workers and lawyers which are exacerbated by the National Transfer Scheme. Professionals who work with children in the local authority in which they were initially placed were identified by some participants as unlikely to be able realistically be able to sustain contact if they are relocated to another part of the country.

b)   Contradictory requirements

A second theme that emerged from the interviews was that most (non)professional roles included contradictory or competing imperatives, which made challenges of working with unaccompanied children further complicated. Some examples of how these contradictory requirements played out include:

- Requirements to complete copious paperwork at the same time as providing warmth and care (e.g. Borders and Immigration at the airport)

- Desire and responsibility to provide care whilst being forbidden from comforting a child (emotionally or physically e.g. hugging): 'You've got a little kid who's burst into tears because they don't understand why they've been held up...it's very difficult because your instinct is to obviously cuddle them and sort of give them support. But technically you're not supposed to do that.' (Jennifer, Union of Borders and Customs).
- Social workers are both responsible for the care of unaccompanied migrants and required to participate in / lead on age assessments.
- Building trust with young people whilst professional responsibilities may compel sharing private information the child has provided with the Home Office.
- Expectations to provide care for children, which fundamentally changes from one day to the next: at 18-years-old they are ejected from care and may become destitute with no recourse to public funds. Participants noted this contrasts to other children in the 'looked after' system, where it is recognised that ongoing support is important. These young people can 'Stay Put' in their foster care or supported accommodation and receive additional support from their local authority, even post-18.

The contradictions between a commitment and responsibility to provide care for all children, on the one hand, and a demand to ensure that immigration regulations and control are enforced, on the other, are evident here (Bhabha 2014). However, as one participant noted, the fact that the Home Office provides funding for the care of unaccompanied children, as opposed to the Department for Education which funds other children in care, is indicative that immigration control is more of a priority when it comes to unaccompanied children.

c) . Representations of separated child migrants
Separated child migrants were represented by professionals in a variety of ways:

- Distinct from other children in care
- Traumatized as a result of conditions which forced migration, being 'torn apart' from family and friends, migration journeys.
- Affected by war / not knowing peace
- Lacking in education, including literacy skills.

Much of this discussion was accompanied by a sympathy, concern and desire to improve the lives of unaccompanied migrant children, and a critique of the way they are treated in the care-asylum nexus. However, such representations of vulnerable and unskilled migrant children can be double edged. Abu-Lughod (2002, 789) argues that a rescue rhetoric, 'depend[s] on and reinforces a sense of superiority by Westerners'.

2. Complexities of navigating the care-asylum nexus

The interviews provided a general sense of some of the strategies used by unaccompanied children as they navigated the complexities of the care-asylum nexus, at least from the perspective of adults who

work with them. Social networks formed by the young people, above and beyond those intended by caring professionals or state provision, were central to their navigational strategies.

a)   *Finding support through informal (religious) networks*

Participants identified a number of informal networks. Informal networks were seen as crucial support for unaccompanied children in a system in which levels of mistrust were could be very high. Often these were religious organisations. Given the religious affiliations, sometimes linked to country of origin, a crucial function of these groups was seen to be the ability to help young people locate family members who they had lost contact with during the migration journey.

b)   *Seeking support through (extended) family*

Some participants indicated that children often travel to the UK because they have wider kin networks here, including uncles, cousins, but also siblings. This is especially the case for those who have come under the Dublin III scheme. However, family members were not always able to provide stability for unaccompanied children, particularly when they themselves were struggling with impoverishment, inadequate housing, and (mental) health issues.

c)   *Maintaining and building transnational families though social media*

Some participants indicated that unaccompanied children maintain transnational family connections via social media, as well as use social media to find extended family members in the UK. Skype, Instagram, Mobile phones were cited as specific means of locating and contacting family members.

d)   *Young people caring for each other*

In response to our explicit probing, some participants indicated that unaccompanied children provided care for each other as a way to survive and negotiate the asylum-care nexus. However, it was striking that participants found it difficult to articulate, in any depth, what this care consisted of. They had not considered this care in any detail, and a number commented that it was quite invisible to them.

Some participants commented that children caring for children was the result of the migration journey, where being without primary adult caregivers made these peer relationships essential for survival. The relationships children established with each other were seen as paramount for their wellbeing and were often compared with familial relationships. For instance, a solicitor involved in supporting unaccompanied children to claim passage from the unofficial Calais Refugee camp to the UK observed how older children would look after younger ones in the camp. However, participants noted that these caring relationships were not always positive, and might include elements of exploitation, negative influence, or inaccurate information. A number of references were made to negative networks that separated child migrants might be part of, including local gangs. Racialised positionings of Albanian child migrants, as 'feral packs', underpinned such constructions of this group.

Others pointed out that these caring relationships were not always recognised or valued by the state. Although there was a commitment to keeping siblings together, this was complicated by rules requiring each child to have their own room in foster care, meaning that children were often not able to be placed in the same home. Although there were some non-kin children who had formed strong bonds with each on their migration journeys, these relationships were not recognised as a reason to place children in the same foster home. In response, some unaccompanied children did request to move into

semi-independent accommodation together. Others, especially with the help advocacy organisations, worked to find ways for their friends to come to the UK.

e)   The complexities of 'going missing'

'Going missing' was a prominent focus of discussion for some participants and clearly a source of concern. This could, however, also be seen as way young people may care for one another or maintain their caring relationships. For instance:

- A police officer who is part of the national project on missing persons explained that Vietnamese children taken into care invariably go missing within 3-4 days because they know they won't be given asylum, so they circumvent the system and go underground with friends.
- A foster care agency explained that when unaccompanied children are placed alone with a foster care family, they may 'go missing'. These children leave to be with other migrant young people from their journeys or extended family members.

g)   Disrupting care relationships through the National Transfer Scheme

Although the financial case for the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) was understood, it was also cited as detrimental to the care and support networks that unaccompanied children may have formed along their journeys, or with adults and children in their initial foster care placements, given that children were placed all over the country and often not with those they had built relationships with (see point 2d about the limited recognition of non-kin peer relationships). The insecurity fostered by the scheme was viewed as undermining the building of care relationships. It was also viewed as a reason that unaccompanied children slipped through the cracks of the asylum-welfare nexus e.g. running away to be with trusted friends or not having their needs met due to the temporality of their stay.

Conclusion

This pilot study has highlighted that unaccompanied children are the intended beneficiaries of state and voluntary sector efforts at care, support and protection. But, they are also subject to significant cracks and contradictory imperatives in the asylum-welfare nexus. Although unaccompanied children are involved in the care of themselves and others, this has received limited recognition by the state and by adult stakeholders in the asylum-welfare nexus. There is every indication that these caring relationships are of central importance for navigating migration journeys and the asylum-welfare nexus, and that these relationships are highly valued by this group of young people. Without understanding more about the meanings, values, and practices of the care of children by children, and without recognising its centrality in the lives of separated migrant children, our pilot study indicates that even well-meaning policy and practice can result in detrimental impacts on separated migrant children.

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