

TOM CHEESMAN - notes

Where in policy or practice are there opportunities for children's voices to be heard and to influence decisions which affect them as individuals or as groups of children?

My observations of asylum-seeking families locally lead me to think that (despite the relatively advanced children's rights infrastructure in Wales) these children generally lack voice, just as their parents/elders do. In fact all asylum seekers are infantilized: not permitted to work, in most cases still learning the local language, unfamiliar with the local way of life, and waiting for others to decide on the most basic matters: whether, where and how they can live. Asylum seekers seek to influence decisions made by the Home Office, its contracted agencies, and courts and tribunals, by putting together a legal case for protection. In this they are dependent on legal professionals (who are not always competent or honest). The way they present their case, their demeanour in court can certainly influence decisions, but in unpredictable ways. Children as dependents are not normally heard at all, although the bare existence of children can affect asylum decisions where a parent is the applicant (e.g. stay of deportation). A child who becomes an applicant (i.e. an unaccompanied migrant on turning 18) is subject to the same rules as adults.

In practice, what are the barriers to the voices of displaced children being heard in decisions that affect them?

On children's side: Language barriers. Poverty. Insufficient understanding of relevant rules. On other sides: Assumptions that adult professionals know best.

Based on your experiences, how important is it to children displaced across borders and to those in host communities to tell and hear their stories and views? Why?

What follows applies to both children and (infantilized) adults. The civic 'culture of welcome' which we seek to promote in SBASSG and Hafan Books (and the more professional voluntary sector initiatives which have emerged from and alongside our grass-roots work, such as City of Sanctuary and Asylum Justice), stresses enabling refugee voices to be heard. First and foremost this means talking with them; it also means publicizing their stories, poems. This has, at the very least, therapeutic value for refugees. It creates dialogic situations both actual and virtual. In a few cases it has opened up new opportunities for refugees as writer-performers and public speakers. It reveals asylum seekers as creative, articulate, reflective individuals. For people in host communities, being offered the chance to hear or read refugees' stories does, at the least, humanize them by individuating them. In host communities, three positions towards incoming foreigners are possible, often overlaid in any one person's mind and feelings. One position is fear, anger, anxiety about a threat. A second view is calculating: newcomers represent an economic and cultural cost or benefit (lower wages, strain on public services, but new restaurants, cheaper corner shops, interestingly exotic people...). Third is the desire to empathise, commonly in terms of experiences of victimhood and (hopefully) triumph over victimhood. Hearing refugees' stories can impact on all three: lessen anxiety; shift a calculation towards positives; intensify empathy and bolster a sense of righteousness, which in turn encourages humanitarian voluntary engagement.

If you could identify one critical question that future research should investigate to address challenges to prioritizing the voice of displaced children in decision-making, what would that be, and why?

I'm setting up a research project on community interpreting in Swansea, which will include looking at children as interpreters. On the one hand, posters in hospitals and clinics announce that children must not be used as interpreters. On the other hand, provision of interpreting services (people or phone lines) is patchy, under-resourced; not all health professionals and other service providers use the services correctly, or at all; in many situations no such provision is on offer (shops, buses, etc). So in fact children often must be used, or there will be no interpreting. Above all, it is not certain that being asked or obliged to interpret is always damaging to a child, or damaging to the success of the interpreting function. I suspect that some children who have the necessary language skills to work (or 'work') as interpreters (as is certainly the case with adult asylum seekers who volunteer to do this) might achieve voice in doing so: gain a modicum of power over their situation, feel and know themselves to be being useful and valued.