



“When there is only the me and the you”: view of the volunteers

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In this article, Ahad, Sameer, Navid and Aarif (not their real names), four unaccompanied 17-year-old asylum seekers from Afghanistan, and Jennina and Esko, two class teacher students in the Intercultural Teacher Education programme at the University of Oulu, give their views of the support person project launched in autumn 2015.

*This Shrovetide feels like laughter.
It's bubbling and tickling.
It starts from your toes, spreads to the fingertips and tickles your eyelashes.
You can see it as a smile on your lips,
as rosy cheeks and snowy clothes.
It sounds like a giggle,
like the most beautiful sound of the world. It
is genuine and comes right from your heart.
This Shrovetide feels like laughter and looks like happiness.
(Shrovetide spent together, 2016, Jennina Lahti)*

About 20 unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and 10 educational sciences students met regularly for seven months as part of the support person project (from December 2015 to May 2016). The number of participants varied and new people also joined the project during its existence. There were both planned activities and get-togethers without any planned programme content. Even though, officially, the project did not continue beyond May, the support persons and the young asylum seekers continued to meet during the summer months by holding barbecues, playing games or by doing other things together. The students for the support person project were selected from among educational sciences students at the University of Oulu on the basis of motivational letters. The university and the reception centre involved organised an orientation session for the students and at end of the project, the students were able to enter it as a freely selected course in their study register.

The young asylum seekers were interviewed for this article in October 2016. Even though the interviewer (Jennina) already knew the young Afghans, the interviews provided them with the first opportunity to express their thoughts about the meaning of spending time together in their own language through an interpreter. We have supplemented the thoughts of Jennina and Esko with the thoughts expressed by other students participating in the project. Their views have been taken from the reflection assignments carried out at the start and at the end of the voluntary project.





Photo: Jennina Lahti

“The best thing was when we met you and could talk with you”

The young men taking part in the project had recently arrived in Finland. They were getting used to a new kind of everyday life with new people. Navid remembers the first days with the volunteers:

Navid: When you arrived we had only spent a short time in Finland. We had all kinds of difficulties and you helped us. We had walks, we hiked and made all kinds of things together and it really helped us. When you spent time with us we had a great time, it was fun.

The volunteers were also in a new situation and in a new setting when they entered the daily life of the reception centre. For many of the students, visiting the place where the young Afghans lived and waited was their first taste of the asylum seekers' world. The way in which the young asylum seekers see the volunteers' role is summed up by Aarif and Navid as follows:

Aarif: For most of our time we are surrounded by foreigners and there are few chances of getting Finnish friends. There are only foreigners in the school and in the place where we live and this makes it quite difficult to get to know Finns.

Navid: My first thought was that are there really people doing this work and helping us without any pay. But you helped us. You really wanted to help and spend time with us. I had lots of problems inside me and then I realised that you came even though you didn't have to. You came even though it was cold, it was raining, it was snowing and it was dark. It really gave me a nice feeling when I realised that there are people who really want to do something and help. (...) It was difficult to have contacts with other people and it was difficult for other people to have contacts with us. You spent time with us, we felt good and all this prevented us from becoming depressed.

In the reception centre, time was something concrete. The young asylum seekers spent most of their time waiting. The waiting was characterised by a succession of smaller events: school, interpreted discussions with counsellors and the processing of the asylum applications, such as the asylum interviews conducted by the officials of the Finnish Immigration Service. However, the residents of the reception centre had more than enough time and it was not always possible to use it in a meaningful manner. The atmosphere could be described with the words of Rebecca Rotter (2016, 85): The idea that “nothing happens” when waiting may relate not only to restrictions on the ability to act in spatial terms but also to a sense of suspension of movement in time.

There were moments when you felt as if the time had stopped. The task of the volunteers was to provide content for the waiting, interrupt the everyday routines, and give the young asylum seekers a brief chance to be just like any young people and spend time with other young people. According to Aarif, the volunteers succeeded in this task:

Aarif: We were all in a difficult situation. We had left home for the first time in our lives. We had endured a thrilling and scary journey to Finland and we were missing our families and longed for home. Spending time with you was really fun and we were able to forget all unpleasant things.

The games, plays and other activities planned by the students made the time spent together more meaningful. Even though it is justified to emphasise the importance of the spontaneous participation of the young asylum seekers, meaningful participation in the “interim space” arising from the asylum seeking process is not something that happens by the snap of a finger (see [Honkasalo](#) in this article collection). At the start of the asylum process, participation may be less spontaneous and involve more planning by others. It may be anything that offers small expectations within the overall process of waiting (See also for example, Brighter Futures 2013). The future class teachers managed the planning of the activities and joint doing quite well.

Sameer: The best thing was when you played with us. Everything was fun.

Navid: You had great and complex things and we always had a great time. There were new things each time and we did different things.

Ahad: You had really complex games and that's why we had a great time. It would have been boring if you only had had simple games.

The lack of a common language was compensated by the fact that both the students and the young asylum seekers wanted to understand each other and establish bonds with each other. The complex games would not have been enough if there had not been any feeling of mutuality.

“And you also had a great time”

Navid: You were so natural. When we did things together we felt that you really want to do these things. You didn't do these things simply because you had to but because you genuinely wanted to spend time with us and do all those things with us. And you also had a great time.

In the words of Ravi Kohli (2015): “Fun is a serious commitment.” This became abundantly clear time and again. Natural feelings, the genuine willingness to do things with the young asylum seekers, spend time with them and to establish contacts with them often came up in the interviews. Navid told about two volunteers who spent their time in the reception centre sitting on a sofa and doing nothing. Even though this may have been because the volun-

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teers were too timid to join the activities, the young asylum seekers viewed the situation differently. According to Navid, they felt that the volunteers did not really want to be in that place that very moment and instead waited to be taken somewhere else. Volunteers and researchers are well aware of the difficulty of “getting to the field” and the occasional thoughts that it would be easier to be anywhere else. On the other hand, people that have worked as volunteers or done research for many years know that you should really plunge into the activity. The commitment emphasised by Kohli means that you sit on the sofa more than once, learn to know each other, invite people for a visit and bring your whole personality into the work. Sometimes, the young asylum seekers must be given enough time to join the activities, while occasionally you can also take the first step. Irrespective of the order, it is important to be genuinely present.

Gradually, you find more words, you are able build trust and loose bonds become stronger. In an uncertain phase of your life, nodding acquaintances, friendly faces and the awareness of being accepted create hope (See e.g. Honkasalo 2011, Kivijärvi 2015; [Maiche](#) in this article collection). This basic feeling of being human can be strengthened by just spending time with other people in an everyday setting: get-togethers, cooking or playing guitar and singing with people with whom you feel at home.

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Ahad: The best thing was when we met you and could talk with you. We had a great time and the boys were prepared to talk and chat with you. It was also great to learn more about your culture.

Navid: The best thing was when you came, it really had a big impact on my life. On how you manage and do things.

Echoing the words of Navid, one of the other Afghan young people thanked the volunteers in the following words: “*Thank you for helping me to become happy again.*” The songs sung by the students and the asylum seekers during their get-togethers reflected the fact that the young Afghans were a long way from home and missed their families (“*Maailman toisella puolen*”) but they also reflected the hope for a better future (“*My heart will go on*”, “*Todella kaunis*”). This reminds us of the fact that even though the waiting (something that every asylum seeker must endure) may seem empty and useless, it is also a time of hope. Waiting for something always means that there is hope for something better. This also makes waiting a personal and emotional experience (Brun 2016, 82; Kohli and Kaukko 2017).

As part of the planning of the support person work and the orientation session preceding it, the students and the reception centre employees also tried to determine what the young asylum seekers (to whom the support was intended) might need. However, the support proved a two-way process and there was a degree of flexibility in the roles of the persons giving the support and the persons that were supported. Navid asked Jennina:

Navid: But I would like to ask you what your thoughts were when you came here.

Jennina: At first we were nervous but that feeling disappeared really quickly. It was always really nice to come here and spend time with you. You became really important to us - you're like at least 20 new little brothers. We are really grateful that we met you and the moments that we have spent together have been enormously important to us.

In a family, you do not need a common language or words, it is enough when you are your true self and care about other people. Both the support persons and the young Afghans characterised the group as a family:

Navid: *It was like having new sisters and brothers, that's how we felt.*

When asked about the activities, the other students also remember the initial nervousness, the sisterly feelings and the fact that they were doing something important. Next we will examine the activities from the perspective of the students involved.



Photo: Jennina Lahti

Being a human to a human

*Hi you important and sweet person,
thank you for being there.*

*Thank you for caring
petting and hugging.*

*You don't need to be more than your real self or understand more than what
you understand.*

You only need to walk alongside me, laugh with me and be near me.

That's all you need to do.

(Of the feeling of inadequacy, Jennina's blog 2016)

In our work as volunteers, we noted that our feelings often went from one extreme to another. Our roles evolved as we spent time with the asylum seekers and communicating them was an interactive process. There were all kinds of difficult feelings that we had to face and deal with as we were doing our work. However, happiness, laughter, joy and genuine showing of care were the dominant feelings.

We were fifth-year students when we took part in the course for the support persons. Compared with all other courses on cultural sensitivity, working with other people and educational ethics, this course was more special because of the people we met as part of the course. The course was also important because it provided us with an opportunity to define our roles as teachers and supported the growth of our own self-awareness.

Voluntary work in the reception centre taught us things about ourselves. It showed us what life is like in the reception centre but at the same time we also got an idea of the darkest and brightest sides of life. The work was a two-way process: It involved teaching and learning, staying near and letting people to come close, listening, telling, caring and the feeling of being important. The aim in the project was to provide the young asylum seekers with a pause from the waiting, fear, uncertainty and the unknown, so that during this short period they could be like anybody else. Our own aim was to understand this wait-

ing and the chance of doing something useful. The common aim was to be just like any other young people, make food, laugh, play, do funny things and spend time together as ordinary human beings. We were somewhat confused by the heartfelt thanks for the time spent together expressed by the young asylum seekers. This was because we felt that it was us that should have thanked them and that there are not words grand enough to express our thanks.

However, at times working with the asylum seekers was surprisingly difficult. We were dealing with young people that had to live in extreme uncertainty. Their own families and the waiting of the asylum decision by the Finnish Immigration Service were constantly in the minds of these young people. The trust-based relationship between the support persons and the young asylum seekers strengthened over the months and the young people started sharing their thoughts. Instead of hearing stories, we began to encounter feelings. There are no courses or study books preparing you for that. However, the process of encountering feelings was made easier by the orientation provided before the project, in which fieldwork professionals told about the situations that we might face. We also discussed our own feelings and encountered feelings in a joint session. Enough time and resources should be allocated to this when similar activities are planned.

In addition to difficult feelings, we also became familiar with many other challenges that you face when working with other human beings. The feelings of inadequacy were highlighted in the reflection assignments of the students. At the same time, the uncertainty experienced by the young asylum seekers was also projected on the volunteers' own emotions. The volunteers commented on these emotions as follows:

At times, we are also emotionally exhausted as you never know what is going on and how these young people are doing. It's difficult not to take responsibility for the problems of these young people and somehow accept that there are so many things that you can't do anything about.

There have been situations where you have to come to terms with your own inadequacy. In many ways, it's an incredibly agonising and painful feeling. You want to be there and do so much more but you can't do everything. There is also the feeling that you can't offer those people all that they need as individuals. In a way, you have to forgive yourself and accept that there is a limit to what you can do.

Their own families and the waiting of the asylum decision by the Finnish Immigration Service were constantly in the minds of these young people.



Photo: Jennina Lahti

The ordinary moments were the best ones. The moments of joint doing, learning and training where the simple act of caring brings tears in your eyes. Every time you feel amazed when you realise how much space there is for overwhelming warmth and goodness in a single room. It is also important to know and see that what you are doing really matters.

However, the most important moment comes when the context and the whole setting fade away, when only the essential is left. When the university, the university course, the reception centre and the waiting for the asylum decision, the past dangers and the uncertain future no longer matter. When there is only “me” and “you”. That moment matters most because that’s when one individual meets another individual. That moment you are totally present: It is no longer a question of pity or a feeling of superiority. It is simply a matter of being a human to a human. The whole meaning of the support person work is in that moment.

*How would I say this to another person
thank you for being you
thank you for being there
thank you for giving the chance to meet you
spend time with you, sing and hug.
I'm so happy that our paths crossed,
you gave me something invaluable for the rest of my life.
Thank you for giving the chance to meet you
and for meeting me.
You are wonderful, a unique drawing made by a master artist.
How could I express this
take care
make your hopes come true and live your dreams
live, experience and be bold
laugh?
How could I put this in words
don't allow anybody to take your inner self, that what you are,
because you are great, in fact you are absolutely fantastic when you are you.
How would I wish
love, happiness, joy
good moments for you in your life?
How should I bid you farewell, give you a tight hug and ask you to stay in
touch?
(Jennina Lahti)*

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Authors



Mervi Kaukko (Doctor of Education, researcher) served as the responsible teacher during the pilot stage of the support person course. Mervi worked as a volunteer in the reception centre, especially before the start of the support person activities.



Jennina Lahti (Master of Education, class teacher) was one of the most active support persons in the group. She conducted the interviews with the young asylum seekers for this article.



Esko Nummenmaa is a volunteer and a class teacher student. He has played a key role in the planning and implementation of the work and in ensuring its continuity.