Cooperation of students and asylum seekers as fulfilling the third task of universities

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In this article, we reflect on the support person work of the students of the Faculty of Education, University of Oulu at the Oulu reception centre from the perspective of the organisers. In the article, we will present ten questions which organisers should ask when planning similar activities. The questions are concerned with two themes: motivation for and long-term commitment to the activities. Joining the forces of educational institutions and reception centres may generate access to versatile resources for meeting shared aims, but the activities must be carefully considered, controlled and persistent. The activities must also be based on the personal needs of the young asylum seekers instead of, for instance, a researcher’s research interest. The cooperation will be sustainable if the actors’ creativity and enthusiasm are fostered with encouragement and necessary resources. If the activities are planned to be as self-directed as possible, the amount of resources required is not extensive.

From help under emergency conditions to support person work

The cooperation between the Faculty of Education of the University of Oulu and the unit for minor asylum seekers of the Oulu reception centre gained new momentum in the autumn of 2015 as a record number of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers arrived in the reception centre. The acute need for additional help at the reception centre met the resources of the Faculty of Education, University of Oulu as students and personnel started to compile food packages, blanket sacks and other necessary things amidst the worst chaos. The volunteers worked in three shifts for around three weeks. The change in the social situation, the students’ enthusiasm and the smoothness of the cooperation led to extending the services from emergency help to support person work for young asylum seekers as part of the optional education studies at the University of Oulu.

The support person work involves ten education students working regularly, persistently and systematically with around twenty unaccompanied minor asylum seekers for approximately six months. The students were selected based on their motivational letters and all of the chosen students were familiarised with their task in orientation provided by the university and the reception centre. The activities served as a pilot for the currently ongoing, expanded course, Volunteer field work at a reception center.
Work with young people requires sensitivity, engagement and trust

The most important remark made on the experience of our activities may seem obvious, but it is worth pointing out: the activities must be based on the best interest of the children and young people. The main goal for building cooperation may not be, for example, saving resources in hope of additional helpers, gathering new experiences or obtaining study attainments.

The aim may also not be a purely research-oriented. At the start of the activities, the asylum seeker situation was prominently featured in the media. The students mentioned the media attention and the interesting societal situation as important reasons for applying for the work (Kinnunen & Pirhonen 2016). The media attention also influenced students to write topical theses on the matter. In turn, this might lead to the motivation for a thesis emerging from factors completely outside of legitimate research interests. Correspondingly, a study with poor preparation or started under false pretences conducted among young asylum seekers may present their voices in a manner that distorts or exoticizes them or emphasises their “misery”. For example, a well-meaning but poorly-prepared student might approach asylum seekers for research purposes and explain to them that the information collected from them is confidential and photographs (or, even worse, videos) will only be used for research purposes. If trust has not been built before this encounter or if the asylum seeking young person does not fully understand the research practices or aim, the promises of anonymity and confidentiality will mean nothing.

From the point of view of a young asylum seeker, disclosing any kind of information to a stranger might appear risky (Dona 2007; Kohli 2006). Therefore, discretion must be exercised when collecting data, particularly at the initial stage of the young person’s residence in Finland. If a decision is made to collect data, the chosen method is significant. For example, it is worth considering whether it is necessary to record an interview or would making notes suffice as better means for making the “voices” of the young people heard (Kuusisto-Arponen 2016). There is a lot of literature available on research ethical principles concerned with asylum seeking children and young people (see e.g. Journal of Refugee Studies 2016 and its special issue Unaccompanied Minors; Kaukko, Dunwoodie & Riggs 2017), and familiarisation with it is recommended. Nevertheless, making situation-specific, ethical and informed decisions on the best choices in a given moment and with a particular group is most important.

Students whose sole aim was getting to collect data for their master’s thesis dropped out of the support person work. The work was planned to not violate the privacy and sense of security of the young asylum seekers. Confidentiality was strengthened by the long-term commitment to the work. Information was gathered to develop activities in the young people’s own terms, with consideration and only after trust had been built.

The purpose of this remark is not to underestimate the research conducted among asylum seeking children and young people. There is a need for research knowledge from the viewpoint of the young people and those working with them. However, our work acted as a reminder of the fact that good intentions and enthusiasm do not suffice as the basis for work or research. Research must be based on confidentiality, and confidentiality requires time, engagement, and child- and youth-oriented activities. The knowledge constructed of the activities consists of multiple voices and levels and is bound by space and time: it cannot be obtained through individual interviews or short...
observations. Ensuring a child- or youth-oriented approach requires time and appropriate arrangements, but, in the end, is fairly simple to accomplish. As indicated by many articles in this collection, it is possible to act ethically and sensibly with and stand by asylum seeking young people in many ways (e.g. Maiche and Husseini in this article collection).

**Joy, enthusiasm and autonomy as saving of resources and supporting continuity**

Our second observation is connected to how to establish activities and sustain them after the initial enthusiasm has waned. Our work began at a time when the asylum seeker situation at the reception centre was exceptional. At the time, volunteers were accepted to the reception centre with careful consideration amid a hectic situation, as familiarising new people with the activities requires using the resources of the reception centre. It was possible to launch the support person work because, in this case, the orientation primarily took place outside the reception centre and as the goals and implementation of the activities were agreed on before starting the work. The work was successful because it could rely nearly fully on volunteers after the orientation. The volunteers independently coordinated and developed their operations. For example, when there was a desire to expand activities, the volunteers applied for external funding, collected donations and organised bake sales.

Owing to the good orientation and commitment of the volunteers, little other resources were needed for the activities. Believing in the necessity of the course both at the faculty as well as the reception centre and finding the place and competent teachers for the course was also crucial. Nevertheless, the most important was the fact that the volunteers themselves perceived the activities positively and with enthusiasm. Numerous other projects sprouted out of the work, involving young asylum seekers, future classroom teachers, reception centre staff and researchers working together for the dissemination of information or development of good practices. An example of these activities is a lecture series on immigration and the asylum situation by the university, the
reception centre, the authorities, and experts from the third sector (see e.g. Lecture by Esa Holappa). A development project for information management methods at the reception centre aiming to utilise and transfer the tacit knowledge of professionals also originated from this cooperation. Smoothly transferring knowledge and good practices to successors is an essential part of developing volunteer work. (see also Kaukko et al. in this article collection).

Well-thought-out cooperation between students of human work and young asylum seekers is combining theory with practice at its best. It is also a form of fulfilling the so-called third task of universities, i.e. part of the university’s input in developing the society (Chapter 1, Section 2 of the Universities Act 2009). The field of operations of the activities described in this article is a reception centre, but similar joint activities could as well be built with other actors.

Ten questions

The articles published in this collection have let us examine the lives of young people through many voices. We also need practical knowledge of how to be involved in the lives of young asylum seekers in a way that serves the needs of the young asylum seekers. In order to be invited to reception centres, a pre-existing relationship or the support of an organisation, such as a university, is often required. The activities require careful consideration of the guiding principles and committed actors, but there is also a lot to be gained from them. Through the volunteer work, the volunteers got to see how little activities may grow big and how one’s small actions may have a big importance to someone else. Facts on immigration, cultural sensitivity or a child or youth-oriented approach learned from books are no match to long-term encounters or tacit, practical knowledge, but, together, these form a fairly good orientation for working with an asylum seeking child or young person. Based on our experience, students have the enthusiasm and ability to be involved in the lives of young asylum seekers and the young asylum seekers miss having contacts with other young people (see e.g. Peltola and Onodera in this article collection).

Despite the fact that every cooperation project is unique and the aims and limitations must be separately considered for each project, we present below ten questions which may be helpful in planning cooperation with a reception centre.

1. Whose needs are the starting point: the students’, the education institution’s, the reception centre’s or the asylum seekers’?
2. What kinds of practical matters (e.g. insurances, orientation, logistics, responsibility, obligation of secrecy) must be arranged for?
3. Is there a permanent staff member in each of the parties in cooperation who can act as a responsible person?
4. How is the commitment of volunteers and staff in the activities supported?
5. How is the autonomy of volunteering activities supported and the use of resources minimised?
6. How are volunteers supported in dealing with difficult experiences?
7. How are the activities developed after their launch?
8. How can we record and utilise the knowledge generated through the activities?
9. If data is also collected from children/young people, how can we ensure research ethics?
10. How is the sustainability of and long-term commitment to the activities ensured?

The list we propose is non-exhaustive and is not applicable to every situation, but, based on the experiences gathered in the cooperation project described in this article, it might help overcoming some stumbling blocks encountered in similar projects.

References


Kaukko Mervi (Researcher and teacher) 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.

Lahti Jennina (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.

Nummenmaa Esko 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.