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FOR Unaccompanied Minors: transfer of knowledge for professionals to increase foster care

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The Provision of Foster Care for Unaccompanied Migrant Children: Some considerations

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Abstract

This article is written as part of the [FORUM project](#) (FOR Unaccompanied Minors: transfer of knowledge for professionals to increase foster care), an EU funded project which sought to enhance the capacity of professionals to provide quality foster care for unaccompanied migrant children, primarily through the transfer of knowledge. The article aims to contribute to this transfer of knowledge by bringing together literature which is of relevance to professionals developing or enhancing foster care services for unaccompanied migrant children (such as social workers), other professionals working with unaccompanied migrant children (such as staff of reception centres, cultural mediators, guardians, legal representatives, youth workers and teachers) and foster carers themselves. It explores some of the pertinent issues that need to be addressed when training is being provided for individuals and couples who wish to foster unaccompanied migrant children, specifically, the experiences of unaccompanied migrant children prior to migration, during their journey and transit and upon arrival in a host country; the 'matching' of children to carers; and the need to value diversity and be culturally competent particularly within the context of cross-cultural placements. The article draws on international research in relation to foster care generally as well as research in relation to foster care for unaccompanied migrant children specifically.

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Introduction

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment No 6 on the Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin defines "unaccompanied children" or "unaccompanied minors" as children "who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so" (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005: 5). A distinction is made between unaccompanied children and "separated children", the latter term being used to refer to children who are separated from their parents or legal or



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customary primary caregivers but who are accompanied by other adult family members (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005: 5). In the European Union in 2017, asylum applications were received from 31,400 individuals who were “considered to be unaccompanied minors” with the corresponding figure for 2018 falling to 19,700 (Eurostat, 2019:1). The majority of these young people were male (86% in 2018) and were aged 16 or 17 (75% in 2018). Over half were citizens of 6 different countries of origin - Afghanistan, Eritrea, Pakistan, Syria, Guinea and Iraq (Eurostat, 2019) - with 48% being citizens of a diverse number of other countries. It is important to note though that these figures do not encompass all children who arrive in Europe unaccompanied: some children may not seek asylum upon arrival or indeed at all but are likely to still be in need of care and protection. For the purpose of this article the term ‘unaccompanied migrant children’ is used to reflect this fact as the more generic term ‘migrant’ encompasses those who have sought or received refugee status or other forms of international protection as well as those who have not. This more generic term fits better with the work of FORUM, (FOR Unaccompanied Minors: transfer of knowledge for professionals to increase foster care), an EU funded project which sought to enhance the capacity of professionals to provide quality foster care for unaccompanied migrant children, primarily through the transfer of knowledge. This article is written as part of the [FORUM project](#).

As will be discussed below, the reasons why unaccompanied migrant children come to western Europe are wide ranging, requiring different types and levels of support. In Europe and beyond, increasing attention is being paid to the use of foster care as a form of alternative care for unaccompanied refugee children. While the individual needs and best interests of each child should always be taken into account in making decisions about care arrangements, international guidance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 1997) and from the Separated Children in Europe Programme (SCEP, 2009) regard foster care as preferable to residential care for unaccompanied migrant children. In the European context, use of foster care for this cohort varies considerably from country to country and even within countries (de Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015) and the European Commission have described it as “underutilised” (European Commission, 2017: 9).

FORUM’s training programme in relation to the provision of foster care for unaccompanied migrant children looks at an array of different topics including the experiences of unaccompanied migrant children; their legal situations; the systems of care in place for them, including the benefits of foster care; the provision of emotional and practical support; cultural awareness and cultural competence; networks of support and professional partnerships; recruitment and assessment of foster carers; matching; and monitoring. Space precludes discussion of all of these in this article¹. Instead the article will begin by discussing why foster care has become the preferred form of care for unaccompanied migrant children, identifying the benefits of this care option and also the challenges associated with it. It then outlines why training of professionals and of foster carers is important. Of particular importance in any such training is that professionals and foster carers have an understanding of the experiences of unaccompanied migrant children, the impact of these experiences and how to support young people in these regards: thus, these are discussed. Given the challenges associated with foster care provision and the multiple challenges that

¹ Due to the authors limited language abilities only literature in the English language has been used. My apologies!



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unaccompanied migrant children experience, the 'match' between carers and young people is discussed, something which is recognised as complex. Particular attention will be paid to debates in relation to matching according to ethnicity and culture versus matching that is 'cross cultural' or 'transracial'. In a context where most placements are likely to be cross-cultural, the role of cultural competence in working with unaccompanied migrant children is then discussed.

Why Foster Care?

Within the European context care provision for unaccompanied migrant children differs considerably from country to country, ranging from care in foster care or small group homes, to large scale institutional care or accommodation provided in general reception centres or in detention centres (UNHCR et al., no date). In some countries, often those on the frontiers of Europe, 'care' provision is limited or non-existent, due to the high numbers of migrants and refugees arriving, and unaccompanied children are therefore simply accommodated with adults, often in arrangements such as make-shift camps which are deigned to be temporary but frequently become more long term. UNHCR et al (no date: 25) highlight that "too often shelter or accommodation is mistakenly used as a synonym for care arrangements while social and psychological components (in the form of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), education, health services) are neglected." In other countries, specific arrangements are put in place for unaccompanied children, often in the form of residential care or foster care. These arrangements can in themselves differ largely from country to country, or even within countries. For example, as regards residential care – or group homes – there may be significant differences in terms of the number of children accommodated or in terms of the quality and level of staffing and care provided. As regards foster care, in some jurisdictions the foster care system may be highly structured and regulated and in others it might be arranged on a much more informal basis (de Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015).

For the purpose of this article, foster care is taken to mean care provided by an individual or couple in their own home, to a child who cannot live with their own parents for a wide variety of reasons. When provided in a structured way, state authorities (such as child welfare agencies) or private sector/NGO organisations contracted by the state, recruit, assess and train the carers, provide support and oversee the care that they provide, and compensate the carers for their care of the young person, either through a salary or through payment of expenses². As mentioned above, foster care has begun to be viewed as the preferable form of care for children who cannot live with their parents, including unaccompanied migrant children. Foster care for unaccompanied migrant children is primarily seen as a form of care that provides stability to young people, ensures consistent adult support, and allows relationships to develop in a more natural and flexible

² While recognising that some unaccompanied migrant children will be cared for in kinship foster care (foster care with relatives or with members of the child's social networks (Van Holen et al., 2019) the focus of this article is on non-kinship foster care. In some contexts, different terminology might be used for care with families – for example supported lodgings or family-based care.



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family environment. This compares with residential care (care in small group homes), where young people are cared for by professional staff who work on a shift basis and where care is more structured and less flexible. In addition, residential care is generally more expensive than foster care (Horgan & Ní Raghallaigh, 2017).

While foster care is generally considered to be preferable, this is not to say that it is always the best option or that there are not challenges in relation to this form of care. In countries without a strong history of foster care provision developing such a system might be particularly challenging, although Gilligan (2019) charts the success of Ireland in accomplishing “the project of de-institutionalisation” (p.227). One of the key challenges associated with foster care provision is a dearth of foster carers, with agencies internationally finding it difficult to recruit carers (de Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015), with this having obvious implications for the ability to ‘match’ young people to placements that best meet their needs. The multiple and complex needs of unaccompanied migrant children might make it difficult for foster carers to provide care, especially if they are not provided with adequate training and support. This contrasts with residential care, one of the benefits of which is that staff are often well-equipped to provide care by virtue of their training and experience. In addition, foster carers, particularly if living in rural locations, may struggle to link young people with other unaccompanied migrant children, whereas within residential care young people are surrounded by peers who may have similar experiences, something which young people value (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013; Ní Raghallaigh, Smith & Scholtz, forthcoming). While peers are considered important sources of support for most teenagers, this is arguably of even greater importance for unaccompanied migrant children, many of whom have travelled to Europe in peer groups and have relied on one another considerably during that period, often a protracted one. The importance of peers as sources of support for unaccompanied migrant children is well recognised in the literature (Oppedal & Idsoe, 2015).

There is a dearth of research comparing how different placement types impact on outcomes for unaccompanied migrant children although in their review of literature O’Higgins et al (2018) highlight that, “in general, young people living alone or in large-scale detention centres had worse mental health than young people living in foster care, with family or in other placements with dedicated support” (O’Higgins et al., 2018: 358). Their review suggests that living with others of the same ethnicity – whether in foster care or residential care – may be influential, something which will be returned to later. Evidence from a study by Kalverboer et al. (2016) in the Netherlands, which looked at the experiences of unaccompanied children living in different care arrangements, found that compared to minors growing up in less supportive environments, minors in foster care fare best” (p.593). In another similar study in the Netherlands, involving some of the same participants, the authors found that “those who feel loved and cared for, respected and stimulated in their development seem to have fewer emotional problems” (Zijlstra et al., 2019: 128). However, these findings may be context-specific, given that care provided in small group homes varies considerably from country to country. A literature review by Mitra and Hodes (2019) found that living arrangements that offered more support with fewer restrictions were associated with “lower psychological distress” (p.199). While the focus of the review was not specifically on a comparison of residential care and foster care, the findings in relation to “restrictions” might suggest that the greater flexibility that is often associated with foster care is beneficial. Although unaccompanied migrant children



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are viewed as children by virtue of being under 18, most are older teenagers who could perhaps more suitably be referred to as ‘young people’ rather than as ‘children’. This is particularly relevant in the context of providing care for individuals who may have been viewed as adults in their countries of origin, by virtue of their age and the responsibilities that they may have held – for example, as protectors of younger siblings and as breadwinners. This needs to be taken into account when deciding what type of care is most appropriate to meet their needs.

Overall, as with all types of decision making in relation to children in care, the individual needs of each child need to be taken into account (Horgan & Ní Raghallaigh, 2019). As such a wide range of care arrangements should be available (UNHCR et al., no date), including options which promote the autonomy of young people (see Rania et al., 2018 regarding the Italian context). Existing options should also be tailored to meet the needs of unaccompanied migrant children, rather than assuming that their needs are the same as those of other children in the care system. In all decision making the wishes of young people should be given due consideration.

The Importance of Training

It is evident that, although increasingly viewed as preferable, foster care is by no means an ‘easy’ option when providing care to unaccompanied migrant children. Indeed, the provision of foster care for any child is complex. No matter who is being fostered, the child or young people is being cared for by an individual or couple who are not their birth parents or the parents who customarily cared for them previously. Thus, in all forms of foster care, a child has been separated from parents and has moved into a new home. In turn, foster carers are caring for someone who has (except in the case of new born babies) been at least partly raised by another individual or couple, perhaps by several, who are likely to have different perspectives and parenting practices. As Phoenix (2016) argues, pointing to the importance of viewing difference through the lens of intersectionality, “the everyday practices that include family rules and traditions are informed by the multiple social categories in which everybody is positioned, including social class, gender, ethnicity and religion” (p. 3).

It is not surprising then that preplacement training is considered a key factor impacting on foster carer satisfaction and in turn, satisfaction affects the retention of foster carers. In a context where, globally, recruitment of foster carers is very challenging, retention of good carers is essential. Research by Randle et al (2018) in the Australian context suggests that preplacement training not only provides practical information prior to a placement beginning but it also signals to foster carers that the foster care agency is committed to supporting them. Providing foster care to unaccompanied migrant children requires a lot of the same knowledge and skills that is required for any kind of foster care, but some different types of knowledge and skills are also required, some of which will be discussed below. Sidery’s (2019) small scale study with foster carers in the UK highlighted that even experienced foster carers considered it necessary to receive training that was specifically about unaccompanied migrant children. Related to this, Van Holen et al (2019: 84) contend that “unaccompanied refugee minors are a vulnerable group that confront foster parents and the foster care system with specific challenges for various reasons”. These challenges relate to



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the experiences of the young people prior to migration, during their journey and during their adjustment to the new country, which are discussed below.

Previous research suggests that foster carers can feel a sense of apprehension or even 'fear' of the unknown, when asked to foster an unaccompanied migrant child without training or preparation, and that a clear sense of what to expect is needed (Sidery, 2019). Pre-placement training "allows agencies to shape the expectations of foster carers and potentially avoid disappointment, thus directly impacting levels of satisfaction" (Randle et al., 2018:219). As such, training can also act as a way of screening out carers who may not be suited to the role: with a better understanding of what is involved carers might decide that foster care is not for them. Ultimately, while this might result in fewer available placements, it is also likely to result in fewer placements breaking down, something which is clearly in the interests of unaccompanied migrant children.

While the content of training is important, attention should also be paid to who delivers the training and whether experienced foster carers and unaccompanied young people themselves can be involved in the delivery (Sidery, 2019). If young people cannot be included, the use of vignettes may be helpful. In addition, it should be recognized that foster carers will need ongoing support and training in relation to many of the topics covered in pre-placement training courses: training should not therefore be considered a once-off event. Instead, fostering agencies need to be able to continue to upskill their carers either through additional formal training or on a one-to-one basis through the supervision they provide to carers.

Unaccompanied migrant children: experiences and support

Prior to placements commencing, foster carers of unaccompanied migrant children need an in-depth understanding of the likely experiences of these children and an understanding of the impact that such experiences might have on the child and on the carers' fostering responsibilities. [FORUM's minimum standards](#) highlight the importance of foster carers being supported to develop, amongst other things, an understanding of "the impact of migration on unaccompanied children" and "the impact of previous adversities, including trauma, on unaccompanied children".

While the backgrounds of the unaccompanied migrant children to whom we are referring are diverse, they share at least two common characteristics: they have been separated from their parents or legal or customary caregivers and they are outside of their countries of origin. These factors in themselves suggest their need for care and support. In addition, many face other challenges. As alluded to above, unaccompanied migrant children have often endured significant pre-migration stressors, including war and violence, witnessing traumatic events, loss of family members and friends through death and separation, persecution because of their beliefs or opinions or those of their families (Thomas et al., 2004; Hopkins & Hill, 2008). Having left their countries of origin they also experience significant challenges, during their journey to Europe. They may have experienced violence and abuse from smugglers, trafficking or law enforcement personnel or immigration officials; they may have witnessed fellow travellers drowning; they are likely to have lived in precarious camp conditions often for protracted periods, where food was in short



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supply, violence was common place and access to health and education services was limited or non-existent. An Afghan-born young person described what happened as he and his friends approached the coastline in a small boat as they crossed from Turkey to Greece:

“We could see figures of men and some cars or vans near where we were coming in. But then there was shooting ... The boat was hit and began to sink. We were so scared. We tried to hold onto each other, my friend Ibrahim said to us “Get hold of everyone’s hand so that we can stay together”. We were in a kind of circle in the water. But some of the boys couldn’t swim and some were panicking. We didn’t know what to do. I could see that some of them were dropping away. I couldn’t see Ibrahim any more. I shouted his name but he didn’t answer.... Ibrahim was my friend, from my village” (cited in Clayton, 2019: 109).

Although it is evident that a multitude of experiences in the past contribute to the vulnerability of unaccompanied minors, Enenajar (2008) argues that often the challenges and risks that are faced in the country of destination are not given adequate attention: “The discourse on the vulnerability of UAMs in Europe focuses largely on pre-arrival factors and thus precludes an analysis of the ways in which the conditions in their country of asylum contribute to the vulnerability of members of this group” (Enenajar, 2008: 5). Perhaps this is because there is a dominant view that the country of destination equates to having reached safety. Yet, research suggests that having arrived in a country of destination or a country of resettlement, a myriad of post-migration challenges are encountered, including significant disputes over age (Wenke, 2017; Gupta, 2019; Lidén, 2019), stressful immigration and asylum procedures (Crawley, 2010), loneliness, (Herz & Lalander, 2017), racism and discrimination (Clayton, 2019), uncertainty (see Derulyn & Broekaert, 2008; Lidén, 2019) and fear of deportation (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013). Stress relating to acculturation can be considerable (Keles et al. 2018), given the myriad of cultural, religious and language differences and difficulties that are encountered. Crea et al’s (2018) research in the US highlights that simple, taken-for-granted things are different or not understood. For example, children may not know how to turn a shower on and off, or how to use public transport; they may not know who to approach for help and who to avoid; they may know how babies are made (Crea et al., 2018), with one professional indicating that “everything they hear, touch, taste, and smell is completely different” (Crea et al., 2018: 59). In addition, the legacy of their past experiences and the multiple losses they have encountered (Miller et al., 2002) may still have a considerable impact. Young people may suffer from the effects of trauma and from mental health difficulties (Vervliet et al., 2014). Added to this, the gap between expectations of exile and the reality of life in the new country may be considerable.

Combined, the various experiences that unaccompanied migrant children have had and continue to have will clearly have a considerable impact on their life in foster care. In particular, it is evident that the experiences will impact on relationships with foster carers, with foster siblings and with social workers and other professionals. For example, if a young person is loathe to talk about their previous experiences, their ‘silence’ (Kohli, 2006) is likely to have a strong impact on their life in foster care and create particular challenges for the foster carers, who may struggle to share their home with someone whose past experiences they know little about (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013). Having an understanding of the various factors



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causing this silence, including lack of trust, is likely to be beneficial to social workers and foster carers as they attempt to create relationships with young people in their care (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013; Eide et al., 2018). This is particularly important given the evidence that the foster child-carer relationship is a predictor of foster carer satisfaction (Whenan et al., 2009), which in turn impacts on retention rates (Randle et al., 2018). Prior experiences of trauma will also be impactful, resulting in difficulties creating and sustaining relationships, difficulties concentrating and difficulties with memory. Both past and present circumstances may combine to manifest in emotional and behavioural problems that foster carers may struggle to manage. In addition, uncertainty about the future may impact on the creation of close relationships or, when close relationships are formed, all parties in the foster home may struggle to cope with the uncertainty regarding the future, particularly if there is a threat of deportation (Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh, 2018).

As well as developing an understanding of the adverse or challenging experiences that young people may have had and an understanding of the impact of these experiences, foster carers also need to be given the opportunity to develop the skills required to support young people in relation to these experiences. Support is defined by Cutrona (1996:17) as “acts that demonstrate responsivity to others’ need”. Carers can demonstrate such responsivity in a number of ways through emotional support, esteem support, informational support or tangible support (Cutrona, 2000). In the context of fostering unaccompanied migrant children, emotional support can be provided by comforting or expressing concern when a child is upset by past experiences or missing his or her parents; esteem support might involve encouraging a young person to persevere when he or she is struggling with learning the new language or feeling overwhelmed by the differences encountered in the new country; informational support can be provided by giving a newly arrived young person practical information about using household appliances or navigating the public transport system or by providing advice about how to approach a difficulty with a friend; and tangible support might involve buying ingredients that a young person can use to cook their favourite food or cooking the food for them. A young person from Eritrea talked about what it meant when a foster parent cooked Eritrean bread:

“It hurts us to remember the past. But this week our foster mum made us injera, the bread from out country, which it takes five days to make, as you have to brew the yeast for many days. We know she cares for us because she does this” (cited in Clayton, 2019; 112).

Carers who are well trained, properly supported, and who have the capacity to reflect are perhaps more likely to be able to judge the type of support that is needed and how best to provide it. For example, equipping carers to know when to allow silence and when to gently ask questions that encourage a young person to open up is vital in the context of young people who may struggle to trust and to confide. In research conducted in the Irish context, an experienced foster carer talked about this:

“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, we're ready to listen. ... But don't feel that you have to



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tell us your past'. ... The curiosity that we all have, or 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 ...” (Foster carer, cited in Ní Raghallaigh, 2013).

Also, given the myriad of challenges, “building relational supports” (Crea et al., 2018: 59) is likely to be key – be they supports from peers of the young person’s ethnic or religious community, from mental health professionals, from youth workers or from others.

While it is evident that unaccompanied children face many challenges, their resilience and resourcefulness is increasingly being recognised (Eide et al. 2018, Smyth et al., 2015). Masten (2001) describes resilience as referring to “*a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development*” (p. 228). Research by Keles et al (2018) suggests that the majority of unaccompanied refugees “do well” (p.58) despite the stressors that they face. For foster carers, it is vital to recognise that vulnerability and resilience exist side by side and hence young people should be supported in relation to both. By recognising not only vulnerability, but also resilience, and by acting on this recognition, carers can play an important role in enabling unaccompanied children to cope and to flourish. Research in relation to refugee young people, including those who are unaccompanied, suggests various sources of resilience for these young people. These include having a positive outlook, possession of a sense of belonging, social support, education, religion, family connectedness and connections to the home culture, (Pieloch et al., 2016; Sleijpen et al., 2016; Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010). Carers can consider this research evidence and apply it to their foster care role, whilst always recognising the individuality of each young person and each young person’s wishes. For example, carers might recognise religious faith as a key tool that helps a young person to cope or to remain positive and thus might make concerted efforts to enable the young person to practice their faith and to open up discussions about it (Ní Raghallaigh, 2011; Ekström et al., 2019; Drammeh, 2019); they might see the importance of education in a young person’s life and thus might provide extra help and support in this regard; they might note the importance of feeling a sense of belonging (Pieloch et al., 2016) and thus make every effort to ensure a young person feels that they are a valued member both of the community and of the family. In terms of feeling a sense of belonging within a foster family, foster children – including unaccompanied migrant children - who participate in research frequently refer to the importance of being included in family practice and routines and not being treated differently to other children in the household (Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh, 2018), with Sirriyeh’s (2013:12) research finding that “in successful placements young people became integrated into family networks of care and carers and young people assumed ‘like-family’ status to one another”. Importantly, in recognising and responding to resilience, the challenges faced by a young person and their vulnerability must not be disregarded or overlooked. The key is to keep both in mind.

Matching of foster carers and children



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Given the diverse experiences of unaccompanied migrant children, their diverse responses to these experiences, and the recognised challenges associated with foster care, it is not surprising that the ‘match’ between the carer(s)/families and the young person is vital in ensuring that foster placements are successful. In the context of foster care, matching is viewed as “a process in which the characteristics and needs of the child are linked with the provision of services (‘home’), which a certain foster family ... could provide” (Pösö & Laakso, 2016: 307). It involves selecting the individual or family that is considered to be “the best fit” (Zeijlmans et al., 2017: 264, drawing on Strijker & Zandberg, 2001 and Quinton, 2012). The complexity of matching is well recognised in the literature, with a review by Zeijlmans et al. (2017) highlighting that a mix of case factors as well as organisational, contextual and decision-maker factors influence the decision-making process. Randle et al (2018) found that “a good match between the carer and the child plays an important role in foster carer satisfaction” (p.220) and emphasises that this points to the importance of the match being subject to a thorough assessment prior to the placement commencing. FORUM’s minimum standards highlight that when decisions are being made about where a child should be placed “the best interests of the child should be a primary considerationand his/her wishes and feelings taken into account”.

Regarding matching of unaccompanied migrant children specifically, research by Ní Raghallaigh (2013) in the Irish context identifies at least 19 different factors that are considered by social workers when engaging in the matching process. These range from family composition, personalities, and the wishes of the children, to the geographic location of the placement, whether there are pets in the household, and children’s interests and hobbies. Ethnicity, culture, language and religion are also identified as important factors that are considered. However, the issue of matching according to ethnicity and culture or, in contrast, of placing children in ‘transracial placements’ are contested ones which are often subject to “heated debates” (Phoenix, 2016: 3). There is a dearth of research evidence comparing outcomes for children who are placed with foster parents of the same or of a different culture, religion or ethnicity (Baginsky et al., 2017). Ethnic or cultural matching is often considered to be important because it is seen to provide an opportunity for continuity for young people – something which the literature on unaccompanied migrant children recognises as important (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010) - and because it may promote a more positive self-identity (Banks, 2003, cited in Baginsky et al., 2007). Related to this, placements that are ethnically matched might facilitate a sense of belonging within a foster family, an important point given the pain that can be experienced when one doesn’t feel such a sense (Phoenix, 2016). In their review of research on the impact of placement type on educational and mental health outcomes of unaccompanied refugee minors O’Higgins et al. (2018) found that within two relevant studies that were reviewed (Porte & Torney-Purta, 1987; Geltman et al., 2005) there were better mental health outcomes for unaccompanied children living in “ethnically matched placement” when compared with children who were not, though O’Higgins et al (2018) point to the fact that the “matching” may be with other children of the same ethnicity in the household rather than necessarily with the adult carers.

Other literature suggests that caution should be exercised as regards the prioritisation of ethnicity or culture over other domains when engaging in the matching process (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015). Attention has been drawn to the danger of culture being ‘essentialised’ in the process of ‘cultural matching’



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whereby such matching is overly simplified and the different cultures or expressions of culture are not considered (Arnold, 2010; Horgan et al., 2012; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015). Drammeh (2019) asks pertinent questions in this regard: “What culture? Whose culture? Who defines it and how? Is this about simplistic labels and stereotypes such as country of origin, religion or ethnicity?” (p.168). This point about simplification is also made by a participant in research in the US who stated that “just because (children) are from the same country doesn't mean they're culturally the same” (cited in Crea et al., 2018:59). Several studies have pointed to the fact that the overall characteristics of the family – such as their openness and kindness – are what is most important, rather than whether they are a match, culturally (Crea et al., 2018; Drammeh, 2019). Related to this, a child from a BME background (not necessarily an unaccompanied migrant child), cited in a study by Oliver (2008), expressed frustration about matching according to race:

“My old placement, I liked them very much. I wanted to stay there...And the stupid social worker said that because I'm mixed race and the carers were white that I had to go to someone who was black...If I was the social worker, I'd say, 'you can stay wherever you're happy'.... (cited in Oliver, 2008, p.194)

Similarly, in an article by Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh (2015), based on two research studies, one in the UK and one in Ireland, the authors point to the fact that ultimately young people placed most emphasis on the importance of the relationships they had with their foster carers. The authors conclude:

“Culture and identity can be nurtured and developed within these relationships, whether in cross-cultural or matched placements. There cannot be a fixed view of whether matched or cross-cultural placements are ultimately better. The specific skills of individual carers and the particular needs of individual young people must be assessed, with recognition that skills and needs cross a range of domains, not just those related to culture. It is unlikely that one family will meet all the needs of a specific young person. Therefore, there is a need to tap into other resources within local communities and beyond.” (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015: 275).

This is also recognised in FORUM's minimum standards which state that “efforts should always be made to place children with carers who can meet their needs, including their ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic needs”. While meeting ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic might be more easily achieved in a culturally ‘matched’ placement, it can also be achieved ‘cross-culturally’ if the carers are properly supported to meet these needs, both in terms of training in cultural competence (as discussed below) and linking with resources in the community. It must be remembered that it is unlikely that all the needs of a child will be met by one family (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015), - be they carers of the same culture or ethnicity or carers from a different culture or ethnicity - thus highlighting the need to develop strong partnerships with local organisations and communities. Given the many needs of children and the multiple factors to consider when trying to match an unaccompanied migrant child with a foster family, recruiting diverse ‘types’ of carers and families is crucially important. The recruitment strategy should always include concerted efforts to recruit migrant and ethnic minority foster carers.

Value Diversity: Cultural Competence



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Given that the matching of young people to foster carers is often going to involve the creation of cross-cultural / transracial placements, cultural sensitivity or cultural competence are crucially important skill for professionals and foster carers to possess in their efforts to respond to both the vulnerability and resilience of unaccompanied migrant children and in their efforts to instill in young people a sense of belonging. FORUM's minimum standards refer to the need for foster carers to "value diversity" and "enable the child to experience a positive sense of identity" and they stipulate that they should be supported to develop an understanding of "cultural diversity". When caring for unaccompanied migrant children there is a need for foster carers to both support them in adjusting to the new culture and society and to help them to maintain a sense of their own ethnic, cultural and religious identity. This is particularly important to consider in contexts where most carers of unaccompanied migrant children are of a different ethnic, cultural and/ or religious background. Valuing diversity involves recognising the importance of 'their' culture without positioning the young person as an outsider (see Phoenix, 2016).

There is a considerable amount of literature in relation to culturally competent social work practice but there is a dearth of literature about cultural competence in the context of foster care. Numerous definitions of cultural competence are available. One provided by O'Hagan (2001) points to the fact that, contrary to what is sometimes believed, in order to be culturally competent, professionals and foster carers do not need to be "highly knowledgeable" of the cultures of the unaccompanied migrant children with whom they work. Instead, a willingness to learn and self-awareness are vital:

"Cultural competence is the ability to maximise sensitivity and minimise insensitivity in the service of culturally diverse communities. This requires knowledge, values and skills but most of these are the basic knowledge and skills which underpin any competency training in numerous care professions. Their successful application in work with culturally diverse peoples and communities will depend a great deal upon cultural awareness, attitude and approach. The workers need not be, as is often assumed, highly knowledgeable about the culture of the people they serve, but they must approach culturally different people with openness and respect – a willingness to learn. Self-awareness is the most important component in the knowledge base of culturally competent practice" (O'Hagan, 2001:235).

The term cultural competence has been critiqued, particularly in relation to the use of the word 'competent' which suggests an end-point (for example see Azzopardi & McNeill (2016) who suggest the term 'cultural consciousness' instead). Notwithstanding this, most writers are in agreement that to be 'culturally competent' one must be open to learning (as pointed out by O'Hagan above) and that the process is an ongoing one: as such foster carers and those working with unaccompanied migrant children don't suddenly become 'culturally competent' because they attended training or have experience of working with this cohort. Instead, through a process of continual reflection, their self-awareness develops as does their competence as regards working cross-culturally. Therefore, learning in this regard is a life-long endeavor, thus suggesting the need for foster care agencies to provide ongoing training, not just once-off input. As O'Hagan posits, self-awareness is of critical importance. To be self-aware the ability to reflect is crucial, with an expectation that you analyze what you "think, feel and do, and then learn from the



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analysis” (Howe, 2009: 171). While being reflective as a foster carer is a skill required for all forms of foster care, it might be needed for an additional reason – that of cultural competence - when working with young people who are unaccompanied. This need for self-awareness and reflection suggests the importance of foster carers receiving on-going support and supervision that amounts to more than just ‘case management’.

Relevant to cultural competence also are issues related to racism and racism. Also, there is a dearth of research focusing on racism and discrimination experienced by unaccompanied migrant children (Wernesjö, 2011), it is likely that it is a reality in the lives of many of these young people. Research evidence points to the negative impact that such racism can have on children and young people’s health and wellbeing (Priest et al., 2013). This suggests the crucial need to ensure that carers have opportunities to examine and reflect on their own prejudices and biases and are appropriately supported to deal with these. They also need to be well equipped to support young people to deal with racism and prejudice that they encounter. While carers who are of a migrant or ethnic minority are likely to have experienced racism themselves and to have developed strategies to deal with it, it is likely that carers who are of the majority population may never have had these experiences and indeed may never have considered their own ‘white privilege’ in this regard. Carers must also be able to counter the often negative perceptions of refugee young people that are in society, including in the media (Dempster & Hargrave, 2017). Developing cultural competence among foster carers will be greatly facilitated by having support workers (social workers or other professionals) who are themselves reflective and conscious of culture and this in turn will be facilitated if these professionals have access to reflective supervision (Hawkins and Shohet, 2006).³

The need for individual foster carers, social workers and other professionals to be culturally competent does not belie the fact that changes also need to occur at more structural and systems levels in order to ensure that the needs of unaccompanied minors are responded to in a culturally competent way. While McGregor et al (2019) advocate for “an approach to ‘cultural competence’ that emphasises the importance of interactions at the micro level” (p.1), they draw attention to the risk of there being “too great a level of reliance on the agency of the individual workers to ameliorate the negative impact of racism, structural inequality and oppression from a macro level especially in working with asylum seekers where the system has such great power over their everyday lives”. They add: “It is not a matter of one or the other but rather a case of tackling social justice and rights issues at each layer of the system not giving precedence to one over the other” (p. 10-11). Agencies need to ensure that policies, procedures and standards for foster care are not Eurocentric. For example, if foster care standards dictate that a foster child has their own bedroom, there may be a need to change this requirement when caring for

³ In terms of developing cultural competence, tools such as Congress’ culturagram (Congress, 1996) might be useful for professionals when undertaking training with foster carers, when assessing their suitability for fostering, and when supporting them in their role. Cultural competence assessment tools might also be helpful in developing self-awareness for example the [Cultural Competence Self Assessment Checklist](#) or the [Johari Window](#) developed by Luft & Ingham (1955). In terms of supporting young people who experience racism the European Network Against Racism (Ireland) [Responding to Racism Guide](#) (Więsyk, 2019) might be useful as might [Transforming Hate in Youth Settings](#) (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2018).



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unaccompanied migrant children - notwithstanding considerations about safety and the best interests of the child - given that these young people may be used to sharing rooms in their own cultures. In addition, there needs to be adequate resources available to work with clients who have a different language to the majority language of the organization (e.g. extra time to communicate, money to pay for appropriately trained and skilled interpreters). Not doing so is likely to amount to what Macpherson has termed 'institutional racism': "the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin" (Macpherson, 1999: 11).

By being culturally competent and by being able to respond to racism, carers will play a pivotal role in demonstrating that they value diversity and this in turn will help to ensure that unaccompanied children develop a positive sense of identity. This sense of identity will also be enhanced by the social supports that a young person has access too, including supports from their own peers and from other members of their ethnic, cultural or religious community. Foster carers play a key role in linking young people with such networks but new carers with few networks in ethnic minority communities will need support from social workers and the fostering agency in this regard. A sense of ethnic, religious and cultural identity will also be greatly facilitated if young people can continue to have contact with their families. FORUM's minimum standards highlight "the importance of family contact (where appropriate and safe)". Again, foster carers and social workers should work together to facilitate contact, taking into account the wishes of the young people in this regard.

Conclusion

The increasing emphasis in Europe on the development of foster care for unaccompanied migrant children places an onus on state authorities to ensure that professionals and foster carers are appropriately knowledgeable to develop high quality foster care provision which has the capacity to respond appropriately to the needs of the young people they serve. This article has discussed some of that knowledge base. Firstly, it looked briefly at why foster care has become the focus of such attention, highlighting the benefits of this form of care vis-à-vis residential care, but also outlining some of the challenges associated with it. Secondly, the article discussed the numerous challenges faced by unaccompanied migrant children, highlighting the importance of foster carers being knowledgeable of these challenges whilst also recognising the resilience that these young people face so that they can appropriately respond to their needs. Thirdly, the article examined matching, looking at the factors to be considered when deciding what family or individual should care for a particular child, with a particular focus on the domains of ethnicity and culture in the matching process. Given a context where most placements are likely to be 'cross-cultural', the article then examined cultural competence in foster care, emphasising the need for on-going training and support to facilitate carers to develop these skills.

Overall, it is evident that there is a wealth of relevant research evidence that can guide professionals working who are establishing foster care services for unaccompanied migrant children or who are enhancing existing systems. While this article has only looked at some components of the knowledge base,



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relevant literature is also available in relation to other components such as the legal system, assessment of foster carers, monitoring of placements. Importantly, the article highlights that each unaccompanied migrant child is an individual and thus, an individualised approach to care planning will always be required.



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