



Testing of Practitioners Toolkit for Working with unaccompanied minors:

Team Meeting of educators and social workers of major social service provider and operator of group homes for unaccompanied minors in Hamburg

Interviewer (I): Do you, and, if so, how do you address the subject of Family?

Practitioner (P): it is not planned. Only if it comes up in a conversation with the minors, if they are there and feel like talking about it, will we address the subject. We recently placed a world map in our office and we have noticed that the youth have started to talk about their flight trajectory to Germany. That is how it all starts. I do not intentionally address the subject. If the youth begins to talk one could pick them up at that point. There is no assessment form to capture this information.

P: Family related questions are asked if we have to apply for their residence permit. This is where we ask questions about the mother's and father's name, etc., where do they live, when were they born? We ourselves don't ask specific questions, but we have to ask these questions for the authorities. This information about the parents' names will only be placed on the coversheet of the case file. But in my practical work, I do not raise the subject of family on my own; only if they wish to talk about it.

P: This approach also results from the fact that the youth are living in multiple identities concerning what they have experienced at the outer and internal borders of the EU and concerning their experience in the so called "Erstaufnahmeeinrichtungen" (*shelters of first access*). That's where they have applied for asylum and have been questioned in a particular way with respect to information concerning their parents. And they have previously been "advised" to reveal only certain information. Therefore, this highly sensitive subject it not our first priority when the young people reach our facility. The first step is to establish a relationship



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of trust. Also we want them to accept that the political circumstances have forced them to live with multiple identities.

P: I can only confirm this approach. In the end, I don't really care if what a youth tells me is the "truth". I actually do receive information but it's the information that the youth willingly provides. Everything else would seem quite risky. I want to avoid opening a door which should have maybe remained closed.

P: The youth often say that their parents are dead because they believe that is required of them. Their parents might expect from them to provide for their income, however as a social worker we are asked to promote the educational development of the youth which constitutes a certain conflict of interest.

I: How does the documentation and the communication with the referring agencies/authorities work?

P: We have the obligation to write a "pedagogical diary" about twice a week. However, one is open as to which information needs to be documented. We are free to write what we deem important. I don't feel under pressure what to write.

P: When it comes to the best interest of the child, I would say that we are confronted with a certain dilemma when it comes to communicating with the Office of youth welfare services who is our supervisory agency...we currently have a girl from Afghanistan who goes to school here in Hamburg. Her parents managed to travel to a state in Eastern Germany, from Greece. We decided that the girl should stay in Hamburg to pursue her educational path as opposed to being united with her parents in a large accommodation center in a new location. In cases like that we face great difficulties as to which information we should - or are obliged to - pass on to the authorities.

P: Yes, we always have to be in close cooperation with each other since it is our responsibility to safeguard the best interest of the child. We have to decide if we pass on certain information immediately, or if we should wait some time to carefully determine how the situation could be solved. These situations are quite unsettling.

P: In an ideal case one has a cooperative case manager at the authorities with whom one can also talk informally. One could decide for instance, that one waits until the young woman has



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received a residence status of her own so that she does not need to be reunited with her parents. Or one decides in certain cases to not fully comply with one's responsibility to report.

P: Or in some cases it is the other way around. The Office of Youth Welfare Services approaches me and decides that the intervention needs to be stopped because the mother of the young individual has arrived in Germany.

I: What happens after a “successful” reunification?

P: Well, what does a “successful” reunification mean? That is quite an ambivalent term. Does it represent a success when a young female UAM has to leave the group home and leave behind her educational support system to join her family in a different German state? In this case there was no leverage to negotiate with The Office of Youth Welfare Services. It was therefore decided that the girl had to join her mother.

P: It is not so much The Office of Youth Welfare Services, but rather the agency for home affairs which makes these decisions although they should be made within a pedagogical framework. There are employees of the office for youth services which are more flexible and others which respond more to the directives given from above.

I: How can one support the family contact of the youth?

P: It depends if this is the wish of the youth. One has to investigate, where the family is and if phone numbers or addresses are available. It then depends on my ability to communicate with the parents. Language plays an important role. I have to decide on a case by case basis if I invite an interpreter, or if the youth takes the initiative on his own.

P: For me, it is as simple as buying a phone card to Morocco so that the youth can talk to his mother or to scan in documents for reunification and send it to Afghanistan. So far contact was established based on the individual desires of a minor. I was asked for help and I helped because I had the technical means to do so.

P: We do it the same way. One of the minors is in regular contact with his parents via skype, we send e-mails and in emergencies we also provide phone contact. In some cases we are in contact with parents, however mostly with aunts and uncles who have come to our office. With some of them we have established quite a regular contact. These relatives live here in Hamburg



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but don't have the financial means to accommodate the youth in their homes. The relatives at times have been in Hamburg for a long time and the contact is very close.

P: One staff member of the Office for youth welfare services took the effort to design a "genogram" to obtain an overview when we took in two cousins into our group home.

P: It becomes evident that definitions of "family" are very different than they are here in Germany.

P: Everything that I am saying here is based on what I was told by the minor. I don't categorically say that everything that a youth tells me is correct. This ambiguity makes our work more difficult and complicates the effort to build relationships of trust with the youth.

P: But maybe we just have to accept this ambiguity, we know about the phenomenon of multiple identities and we don't need to hear "I swear by my mother that this is the truth (laughs)"...Maybe later we will find out that things have happened differently.

P: After 1-1.5 years different stories begin to emerge. I had a minor who came to apologise for having told me things that were not true. He said I am sorry for not having told the truth but I had to tell this story because I was advised to do so...the minors are being advised by people who tell them, if you go to this country you have to say this and this. If you do so you get support and maybe asylum. If the young people start to trust us they eventually come out with the truth.

P: But of course, there are also conflicts with parents. It is important for us to discuss certain conflicts by involving the parents, for instance a situation in which we deemed it more effective for the daughter to remain in Hamburg and not be reunited with her parents in Eastern Germany. We also take and accompany the minors to the large accommodation centers (where adults are housed).

I: How can family networks be used to support the emotional needs of the youth? Have you faced situations in which family contact is best avoided?

P: Oh yes! In the case of the Kurdish families who sent their kids in the late 1980s. They used the minors for drug trafficking.



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P: Yes, there are individual cases. For example, a young woman who has decided not to join her family in a large accommodation center. She wanted to escape from all the coercion. She wants to lead an independent life. It was all very dramatic and it was decided amongst everybody that this young woman would be taken away from her family and would be accommodated in a group home for UAMs due to the numerous conflicts with her parents, uncles and brothers. This way, the young woman had the opportunity to gain a certain distance from her family. But now she is back in contact with her family. During the whole process however, she was very closely assisted by us.

P: I find that there is quite a fine line – viewed from an ethical point of view. For who do I - as an individual - lie? Where is the limit? This is a difficult question to answer. And viewed from an educational perspective: If I 'play the game' what do I really do for the youth? In reality I shield them from the real processes in this society. There is a great likelihood that these constructed narratives will be revealed at some point and the youth will be in serious trouble. This often happens when it is least expected and least ideal for the youth – I have experienced quite a few of these coincidences in my career. Can I take on this responsibility? Or how do I manage to appropriately prepare them for these realities whilst still working on establishing a relationship of trust with them. I find this to be an enormous challenge.

P: I would like to introduce another perspective. If we are committed to a family focus in our work we are ultimately bound to a legal system which undermines this emphasis. Even in situations where a mother or sister is dying back home and the youth wishes to visit her to say goodbye, he will not be able to do so. Due to the limitation of free movement, a family oriented approach to our work is de facto, impossible. Only a small minority can claim individual reasons of political persecution. In the majority of cases socio-economic reasons cause parents to send their children away to protect them from discrimination and life-threatening situations and to give them the possibility to access education. That's why, in theory, it would be possible to grant the minor the right to free movement and to visit their families. But this is not allowed. I find this to be an enormous problem and a great hypocrisy behind an approach that claims to strengthen family relations and family tracing and that asks for solutions for reaching this goal. For me, the first step would be the freedom of movement to provide possibilities to stay in contact with the family. There are some biographies in which contact was only possible after 10 years. During all these years the minors have said that they wish more than anything to once more sit down with their family around a table and eat together. And this would be possible. If we step out of our set system: Why is this not possible?



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I: However, in their asylum cases the youth indicate reasons that prevent them from returning to their country of origin?

P: These are socio-economic reasons. Today, the tendency is no longer to construct individual reasons of political persecution in a request for asylum. Even those who prepare the asylum request with the youth have understood that this is absurd. In the past, we had 9 year old children, who had to describe their individual political persecution during their asylum procedure. These children began to wet their beds at night. This is absurd. Where does this leave the best interest of the child? Even the National Office of Migration and Refugees has recognised this, they have demonstrated their commitment to make the asylum procedure more child friendly – put some candy on the table and so on... but at least they are addressing the issue. The youth report: we are coming from Iran, we have worked in a „Bergwerk“ at the age of 11, we have carried stones for years, we want to go to school, we want our right to free movement, we want to access our right to personality development. What they request in this context is not a residence permit in line with the asylum law (Asylverfahrensgesetz) but rather with the residence law (Aufenthaltsverfahrensgesetz) claiming health related and humanitarian reasons. So there has been a shift in the reasons that young people base their claim to residence on. So one could say, if one really wants to promote a family-centered approach, one should grant the right of mobility to the youth so that they can be in contact with their families. Right now, they are unable to have this contact unless their families manage come to Europe. But only a small minority of family members is in Europe. Most of them remain outside of Europe. Allowing for mobility would change our work significantly.

I: What do the parents expect from their children? Do most expect their children to send home money, or is it just a stereotype?

P: Today this is not so much the case anymore. This was more relevant in the past. However, I do see significant expectations from the parents at least in those cases in which one knows where the families are and where contact exists. There are expectations that the young person gets a good education and goes on to university. There are other parents that might expect that there is enough support in Germany and that their daughter doesn't need to work too hard. So there is a great variety of expectations and assumptions.

P: Yes, I believe there is a great array. There are those parents who do have the economic resources to send their children. However, I feel there is an increase again of parents who have invested their savings into their children's transit to Europe and who have very clear ideas of



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how the youth should support their younger siblings and other family members.

I: Does this potentially lead to the wish of the youth to avoid contact with their families?

P: A minor who was recently able to travel to Iran, said that it was very nice to see his mother but that the visit has also triggered great conflict. The youth has a younger brother back in Iran who has to work under the most difficult conditions which obviously leads to serious tensions between the siblings. The younger brother says, you can go to school, you can do your „Abitur“ (*most advanced school degree in German school system*) and have all the opportunities. The family's money is not sufficient and the father says you have to work in Germany, the streets are paved with money over there. You have to support us here in Iran. However, if the youth would do that he would not be able to achieve his educational goals. At the same time he doesn't receive any kind of acknowledgement for what he has achieved over here at least not from his father and his siblings. Maybe from his mother. After this trip he said, he is not sure if he wants to be exposed to this treatment again, it was too difficult for him.

P: I believe that very few young people are not interested in having contact with their families. The family is everything. One expectation can also be that the young person will get the rest of the family to Europe because they don't have a future back home. The transit from Afghanistan is very expensive; it costs a few thousand euros per person. We have one minor in our group home who is a goatherd and who took four years to come over here. He walked and took busses and was stranded in Russia for a long time. He could not come in a plane and pay traffickers to get a false passport. This is the exception however; most youth come from families with more resources.

I: Have you experienced cases in which minors were sent back and where this decision did not go along with the best interest of the child?

P: I don't know of any cases of deportation to their country of origin. I just know of cases of reunification here in Germany. Some of these cases where young people had to leave Hamburg to join their families in remote towns in Eastern Germany have been very dramatic and disgraceful. I have declared some of these cases as a threat to the child's welfare. The authorities have ignored these requests. In order to further pursue this agenda I would have needed to do so as a private person. I decided not to do so because there are too many cases to pursue. But that was extremely touching and extremely wrong.



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P: I think the practice of deportation has changed since the 1990ies and has become more lenient. If it comes to deportations it would happen after the youth has reached the age of 18.

I: Do you know of cases in which a reunification with their families in their country of origin would be in the best interest of the child?

P: I don't really think about that because I cannot judge at all about the local situation in the respective countries of origin. I think if I really knew what happens in these places I might see this differently. So the question doesn't really occur. The youth are here and that is the situation I have to deal with.

P: In most cases I cannot judge the situation based on the narratives of the youth. Many of them are quite introverted and don't tell me much. I only get a tiny piece of what is going on in the wide spectrum of what is going on in their heads. The majority of them process their thoughts on their own. So there might be a few of them, where psychologically a return to their country of origin would make sense but I really can't fully judge.

I: What are the prospects for these minors?

P: The numbers of UAM have changed significantly. In the mid 1990s the numbers were very high. Around 2003/2004 the number decreased to around 20 UAM a year in Hamburg, today we have 20-30 UAM arriving each month in Hamburg. Also, the countries of origin have changed. We have received quite a few girls from Kenya whose chances to stay and get asylum are not very high. The same is true for Egypt. These are countries that we can fly to for vacation. That is different from countries in civil war like Afghanistan and Somalia. It is a very insecure legal situation. We have to see how the authorities will deal with the new rise in the numbers of refugees.

I: Do you cooperate with agencies and NGOs in other EU countries like Greece?

P: Unfortunately not. We have family members sitting in Athens and it would have been helpful to have a contact down there to assist the family members in coming up to Germany.

P: It would actually be very useful to have the youth be briefed early on as to what they can expect here in Germany. I have one youth who is currently doing an internship at a grocery store and who is completely surprised that he has to work on Saturday. This is a result of a



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misguided construction of what to expect in Germany. I continue to observe that the youth is not being informed correctly of the realities of the system they come into.

P: On the one hand that is true. On the other hand they are very well informed that the socio-economic situation here in Germany is far better than in Greece, Hungary or Italy. That's why this desire to come here is understandable.



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