



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



## ***Childhood in the Camps: investigating the provision and effects of play-based interventions for displaced children living in refugee camps***

**ESRC DTP Collaborative Studentship in the Midlands Graduate School**

**University of Birmingham, the Flying Seagull Project, and University of Nottingham**

### **Overview**

This PhD research explores the pressing question of how to understand and attend to the wellbeing of children in refugee camps. It intersects research on feelings and relationships in learning; children's theatre and arts; children's experiences of refugee camps and asylum seeking; children's subjectivities; and biosocial influences on learning and wellbeing. It works in close collaboration with specialist children's circus charity, the Flying Seagull Project, which is engaged in sustained work in refugee camps in Europe and draw on developing ethnographic approaches to generate nuanced accounts of participatory play-based interventions and how these contribute to children's current and future wellbeing. The research has potentially huge social importance given the refugee situation in Europe – it will provide much-needed insight into how play-based children's theatre and clowning work in trauma contexts and show how the effects of such interventions might go beyond individuals to create new forms of the social through the production of empathy, understanding, reciprocity, joy, and laughter.

### **Background**

War, extreme threat, and dislocation are the experience of unprecedented numbers of children now in formal and informal refugee camps in and on the borders of Europe. Aid agencies and Governments foreground the immediate need for shelter, food, health care and freedom from threat. But all children's right to 'full opportunity for play and recreation' is set down in Principle 7 of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and, with specific reference to children who have experienced crisis or trauma including that resulting from persecution or war, Article 39 of the international Convention on the Rights of the Child underscores the responsibility of states to 'promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration [...] in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.'

Some aid agencies and children's charities are attending to children's need for recreation and play, as an integral part of everyday life in the camps and children's future wellbeing. The Flying Seagull project <http://www.theflyingseagullproject.com> a UK-based troupe of entertainers engaging children and adults in art, music, craft, dance, circus skills, games and performances, is one such charity currently undertaking the majority of its work in refugee camps in Europe. These activities may seem out of place in refugee camps, but the importance of play, laughter and relationships of care are all identified as important contributors to wellbeing and resilience in the long-term.

## **Play**

Play is at the centre of early years and education policy and provision and is key aspects of wellbeing for all age groups. Intergenerational play supports relationships between children and their adult caregivers, and provides opportunities for children to experience safe and supportive relationships with adults and children of different ages.

## **Laughter**

Current research shows that laughter is an important feature of social life and social functioning and a key factor in wellbeing. Laughter has a role in creating and maintaining social bonds, regulating feelings, relieving stress and resolving conflict, and making us feel better, with the release of endorphins during shared laughter (as well as during group participation in music, singing, dancing and playing games or sport) contributing to this bonding effect. Furthermore, understanding the potential meanings of laughter is a skill developed during childhood and early adulthood.

## **Care relations**

Relationships of care between children and adults (primary carers, teachers and others) are recognised as crucial to children's wellbeing and learning. Learning is enhanced and challenges enabled when the learner is 'held in mind' by the teacher. Relationships of care contribute to the development of resilience, a capacity that is extremely important in navigating the day-to-day challenges of life as well as serious crises or trauma. The significance of these relationships for learning and wellbeing is also being shown by epigenetic research using animal models that is being extended to work with children.

## **Childhood**

Childhood itself is the subject of scholarly work, with childhood studies suggesting the child should be understood as a socially and materially constituted phenomenon rather than a self-evident individual. At the same time, it asserts that children's experiences and voice should be attended to. Children's lives in refugee camps put pressure on received notions of the child and childhood and may suggest new temporalities and trans-disciplinary understandings.

## **Arts education**

There is a body of research into arts in conflict settings (e.g. Rwanda, Katrina, Northern Ireland), but little of the research is child-focused; it tends to be in one tradition e.g. art therapy, drama; and none brings together the bio-psycho-social, arts education, and the experience of refugees (the three areas covered by the supervisory team). Furthermore, there is an absence of arts research that is sustained over time. This will be one of very few longitudinal studies of the work of one company and participants. It will produce a new version of pedagogic documentation to generate detail about the value of arts experiences in this context.

## **Research questions**

- What are children's everyday experiences of play and laughter in refugee camps?
- What sorts of play-based interventions are and can be offered to children living in refugee camps?
- What are children's, parents', accompanying adults', and play-workers' experiences of play-based interventions?
- What is the significance of relations of care in play-based interventions?
- What are the reported effects of children's participation in play-based interventions?

- How can children's wellbeing be better supported in the context of refugee camps?
- How can understandings of play, laughter, care relations, wellbeing, childhood and refugee camps be extended?

### **Methodology and techniques**

The study will undertake ethnography of play-based interventions for children living in refugee camps offered by the Flying Seagull Project. The use of ethnography to better understand life in refugee camps is increasing as researchers recognise the importance of understanding camps as social and political sites and places regularly though of as abject spaces, such as refugee camps and shanty towns, are understood to be spaces of life and desire. A range of specific techniques will be used: participant observation; collaborative generation of audio-visual, narrative, and arts-based accounts; and interviews.

During years 1 and 4 the student will be based primarily at the University of Birmingham, with some time spent with the Flying Seagull Project at their Head Office in London, at UK-based training and events (such as fund-raising performances at festivals), and potentially in Europe.

During years 2 and 3 a substantial amount of time will be spent in Europe working with the Flying Seagull Project in refugee camps and other settings. The student will travel as part of the Flying Seagull Project troupe to refugee camps in Europe to undertake ethnographic research. This will involve:

- Engaging in play-based interventions with children in refugee camps
- Undertaking participant and semi-participant observations of play-based interventions
- Gathering narrative accounts from Flying Seagull Project and other aide workers about play-based work with children in refugee camps
- Gathering accounts (audio-visual, narrative, arts-based) from Children and families about the place of play in their everyday life in refugee camps
- Gathering expert interviews concerning the impact of trauma and dislocation on children and the potential role of play-based interventions in camp setting for ameliorating that impact.

### **Anticipated outcomes**

The research will generate new knowledge about the wellbeing of children living in refugee camps as well as insights into the contributions that play-based interventions can make to this. This will benefit the Flying Seagull Project by formally documenting analysing their work and benefit the wider field of agencies working with children living in refugee camps or who have been settled. The research will offer new insights for education, childhood and migration studies pertaining to play, laughter and wellbeing, thereby positioning the student for future scholarly or professional work in these fields. The study will also have policy significance for governments and agencies planning in relation to refugee children.

### **The Applicant**

The successful applicant will need:

#### *Essential:*

1. a good first degree (2.1 or above) in sociology, anthropology, education or related area
2. an understanding of the needs/experiences of displaced people, particularly children living in refugee camps
3. an understanding of arts/play-based education

*Desirable:*

1. experience of delivering play/arts/circus for children
2. experience of working with child refugees/children who have experienced trauma
3. a higher degree in sociology, migration and refugee studies or similar.

Working with children in contexts such as refugee camps is potentially physically and psychologically demanding; appropriate supervision and support will be provided to the student by the University of Birmingham and the Flying Seagull Project.

**Application Process**

To be considered for this PhD studentship, please complete the Collaborative Studentship application form [available online here](#) and along with two references email this to [d.you dell@bham.ac.uk](mailto:d.you dell@bham.ac.uk).

**Application deadline: Monday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2017**

**Midlands Graduate School ESRC DTP**

Our ESRC studentships cover fees and maintenance stipend and extensive support for research training, as well as research activity support grants. Support is available only to successful applicants who fulfil eligibility criteria. To check your eligibility, visit:

[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/mgsdtp/studentships/eligibility/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/mgsdtp/studentships/eligibility/)

Informal enquiries about the research or the School of Education, University of Birmingham prior to application can be directed to Professor Deborah Youdell at [d.you dell@bham.ac.uk](mailto:d.you dell@bham.ac.uk).