

# **“Constructing mentorship as a support structure for ‘unaccompanied minor refugees’ – insights from an Austrian research project into the actors’ point of view”**

Proposal for a Workshop

**XXVII<sup>ème</sup> Colloque européen du réseau REFUTS : « L’INGENIERIE SOCIALE EN EUROPE: Quel rôle pour les travailleurs sociaux et les « personnes concernées »? »**

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## Abstract:

Science 2015, “rich” countries in Middle and Northern Europe have experienced a massive influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa. This has led to a huge expansion of all kinds of supportive structures for these people, especially for those claiming asylum in one of the receiving countries, e.g. Austria. In this broad field, being an “unaccompanied minor refugee and asylum seeker” is seen as one of the most vulnerable living situations and social positionalities. Indeed, countries which signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international agreements concerning refugees are obliged to guarantee equal treatment of these minors, to enforce their right and to provide them with adequate support.

Nevertheless, in Austria, in particular, these young people are strongly discriminated through state authorities, including those in the field of youth welfare. For example, underage young refugees without asylum status or subsidiary protection status are generally not treated within the normal, professional system of out-of-home care respectively residential youth welfare services. In fact, they are sheltered in dwellings financed through the basic supply services for refugees, including mass accommodation without adequate professional treatment.

Partly as a reaction to this, some initiatives across Austria, which are only loosely coordinated, have pushed forward the establishment of mentor programs for “unaccompanied minor refugees”. Within these diverse programs and initiatives, which are ironically often organized by state-run ombudsman institutions for the rights of children and youth, individual mentorships between a “local” adult volunteer (individual, couple or family) and a young refugee are established. These mentorships, also called “godparenthoods”, are intended to function as psycho-social support structures and to foster the social integration of teenagers and young adults who live in Austria but are separated from their families. Nevertheless, by and by, these mentorships can also take on also more specific functions, such as the integration of the young refugee into vocational training or into the labor market.

From a research perspective of social work and social pedagogy this raises the very basic question: What is constructed in this context through the different actors? To put it differently, it is necessary to address this phenomenon with an open attitude. Within a fundamental research perspective we have to reconstruct how this “doing mentorship” for young refugees works, is brought about and impacts on the participant actors.

Up to now, at the University of Salzburg, our research team has looked deeply into one specific training program through which local adult volunteers are “educated”, “qualified” and “certified” as mentors, using participant observation. Likewise, we conducted relatively open and narrative interviews with the addressees respectively users

of these mentorship programs, i.e. with both mentors and young refugees. Our main aim is to reconstruct how these actors make sense of these mentorships and related activities, such as the training or the meetings between mentors and mentees. Up to now and on a global scale, no such research has ever been conducted. In a broader sense, our research is critical for social work and social pedagogy, as it looks into the processes and ways in which new forms of social support and social help are organized. This happens partly by transcending the established, traditional nation-state-based structures of welfare and social protection, especially in the field of youth welfare.