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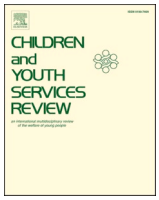

Pockets of love. Unaccompanied children in institutional care in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how needs for loving relationships are met for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Finland. The data was collected through a focused ethnography with 13 unaccompanied children. The findings show that institutional protocols and practices fail to consider the need for love of these children, hindering their possibilities to create or maintain loving relationships. The findings also suggest that new loving ties could be created when individuals invested in them.

1. Introduction

> *'Recognising that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding'*
> *(*The Convention on the Rights of the Child [CRC], 1989*: Preamble).*

Researchers have shown for decades that children need love and stable, trusting relationships (e.g. Chabot, 2008; Evans, 2020; hooks, 2000; Kelly, Thornton, Anthony, & Krysik, 2021; Liao, 2006; McGovern & Devine, 2016; Warming, 2015; Kaukko et al., 2021). This is commonly recognised, for example by the UN that states that children have a right to "happiness, love and understanding" (The Convention on the Rights of the Child [hereafter CRC], 1989; see also Liao, 2006). Bringing children up with love also strengthens communities and keeps people together (hooks, 2000: xxvii). In this research, we look into how love plays out in the lives of the children who have been placed in a particularly vulnerable position, unaccompanied children. The topic was brought up by the 13 unaccompanied young people taking part in this research.

Previous research has explored young people's perceptions of love (e.g. Haldar, 2013) and in particular how they describe loving relationships (e.g. Viejo et al., 2015). Love in young people's lives is also connected to parenthood (Sabey et al., 2018) and sexuality (Senior et al., 2020). Love in institutional settings has received very little scholarly attention, with exceptions of pedagogical love in schools (e.g. Johnson et al., 2019; Kaukko et al., 2021), and research on love in residential care (Evans, 2020; Kelly et al., 2021; Thrana, 2016). These studies highlight that love in the lives of institutionalised children is scarce or even non-existent (e.g. Evans, 2020). Furthermore, and even more importantly, there is not enough research-based knowledge on love in the lives of these children.

This article is based on a focused ethnography with 13 young people who once arrived in Finland as unaccompanied children and lived in institutions. 'Unaccompanied children' is a term used in research and policies to describe young persons under the age of 18 who are seeking asylum and have been 'separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so' (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 1997, p. 1). Institutional policies acknowledge these children's right for care, and many practices are designed to protect unaccompanied children's childhoods (see for example Council directive 2013/33/EU; CRC, 1989). They are, for example, offered a safe place and legal representatives. However, while the housing and legal representatives provide some level of physical and legal security for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, their needs for safety, reliability and security may not be met (e.g. Chase, 2013; Connolly, 2015; Herz & Lalander, 2017; Kohli, 2011; Ní Raghallaigh, 2014; O'Toole Thommessen, Corcoran & Todd, 2017). The representative is rarely present in the child's life, and any other built ties and connections become broken when the children are assigned to a new

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location if they receive a residency permit in Finland (Chase, 2013; Herz & Lalander, 2017). These relocations may constitute an on-going 'forced migration' after their initial forced migration across borders (Kauko & Forsberg, 2018). In this research, we are interested in the possibilities of unaccompanied children for creating loving relationships after they arrive in Finland.

The design of this research is pinned on the idea of childhood as a process where becoming a child is not static, but always varying in relation to time, space and relationships (e.g. Alanen, 2005). The childhood at the focus of this paper is formed in war, in forced migration, in seeking asylum, in institutions replacing homes, far from immediate caregivers. This kind of childhood is in many ways different from a childhood that forms in peace, dwelling, safety, and in homes as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are forcibly and abruptly distanced from their caregivers. Previous research shows that separation from caregivers creates feelings of insecurity (Leinonen & Pellander, 2020) and can cause long term effects on children's mental health (Miller, et al., 2018) and on successful resettlement (Derluyn et al., 2009). Furthermore, in the host country, asylum seeking children are often stigmatised (Korkiamäki & Gilligan, 2020), their existing knowledge is commonly questioned in schools (McIntyre, 2021), they can be seen as untrustworthy (Wernesjö, 2020) or even as a threat to the society (Herz, 2019).

For childhood research to be aware of the range of different kinds of childhoods, it is important that we hear the views of children in vulnerable positions, placed in the margins of our societies. This article contributes to discussions about childhood in institutional care. We highlight a perspective raised by the children themselves, that is, their possibilities to experience love. The young people in this research talked about how difficult it is to build loving ties as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Love is a central aspect of their lives, yet it is rarely talked about when making decisions related to asylum-seeking children. Therefore, in this article we ask: What do asylum seeking children tell about building loving relationships in their lives? The results make visible how institutional barriers hinder building and maintaining loving relations, but also, on the other hand, how asylum-seeking children managed to create loving experiences in their own lives.

The results of the research will showcase how the unaccompanied children's efforts to create love in their lives was hindered by institutions that were meant to keep them safe. We will begin the paper by explaining the methods and the context of this research.

2. Focused ethnography with unaccompanied children living in Finland

This article draws on a focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005; Wall, 2015) conducted by the first author in 2018. The first author was responsible for designing and carrying out the empirical research, including participant recruitment, interviewing and conducting the initial analysis. The other two authors joined the deeper theoretical exploration of the research material.

2.1. The participants and the context of the research

This research was conducted with 13 young people (four identified as female, nine as male) who arrived in Finland during 2014–2016 as unaccompanied children. At the start of the study in 2018 the young people were 15 to 19 years old, and all had received at least their first permit to stay. Although at the start of the study some participants were no longer considered children due to being over the age of 18, their stories depict childhood created by practices related to seeking asylum without primary caregivers.

In 2015 the asylum claims filed by unaccompanied children went up tenfold from 2014 (Finnish Immigration Service, 2022). Most of these children came from Afghanistan (1915), Iraq (635) and Somalia (253). The participants were a part of this demography. Considering the small number of participants in this study and unaccompanied children in Northern Finland in general, we do not reveal any personal details of them. One reason is to protect the participants' anonymity and another reason is to avoid personalising the themes we discuss. Our interest is on how the practices in the lives of unaccompanied children make space for creation of loving relationships. Detailed demographics of the young people would direct the interpretation towards their individual experiences and away from the conditions and practices creating such experience. Finally, and most importantly, the lives of refugees are constantly and violently opened up for inspection by a number of officials and even the general public. The topic of this research does not require opening up their personal past experiences, and we will not do so.

The ways in which unaccompanied children arrive in their destination countries vary, as do their experiences during the journey. Some arrive by plane with an escort while others spend months or even years on their journey before reaching their destination (for more information about these experiences see e.g. Hopkins & Hill, 2008; Lems et al., 2020). Although being referred to as unaccompanied, these young people seldom travel to their destinations alone. They may be joined by friends or relatives or travel in groups with other children, but their age and separation from their primary caregivers establishes their status as 'unaccompanied' upon arrival. The aim is to keep the travel companions together, but if they are not members of the same immediate family, the travel companions may be separated from each other after their arrival. Some of the participants of this study had travelled to Finland with relatives or friends. Some were still living with those travel companions where others had been separated on their arrival due to their age difference.

When unaccompanied children arrive in Finland, they are normally placed in living units based on their age: those under age 16 live in group homes, while over 16-year-olds are housed in more independent, supported living units. Sometimes unaccompanied children are placed in foster families, which aim to offer family-like living arrangements (Kuusisto-Arponen, 2016). When the children receive their residency permit (that typically ranges from 1 to 4 years), they are allocated to a municipality. Often this means they must move either within the same town or to another municipality. After the move, the housing options are again evaluated based on age and location as they were on the arrival of the children. This may mean further relocations as when the children reach the age of 16, they are expected to take an increasing responsibility for their own lives.

All the participants in this research were assigned a place in institutional care on their arrival. All had been relocated at least once. At the start of the study in 2018, eight of the 13 participants lived in supported living units, two were living in a family and three were living independently. During 2018, five more participants moved to live independently.

2.2. Producing the data

The research design was based on focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005; Wall, 2015), in which short-term, intensive regular field visits replace the traditional, long-term immersion to the field. The thirteen participants were recruited by visiting their living units and schools, introducing the research and inviting the young people to take part in the research. The first author recruited the participants by first contacting the gatekeepers, that is, the staff of the schools and living units. The participants recruited through schools heard about the study from the first author, and then contacted her directly. All willing unaccompanied youth were invited to participate. The process was the same in one of the living units, and in two of them, the staff, at their own wish, recruited the youth on behalf of the researcher. Voluntariness was emphasised and the participants knew participating would not impact the handling of their case. The field work with the participants was carried out in a 10-month period in 2018. During this time, the first

author frequently visited the various places in Northern Finland in which the participants lived (Knoblauch, 2005; Wall, 2015) and invited her to spend time in their homes, schools and other locations chosen by them. The fieldwork was multi-sited, so not all the participants knew or met each other during research (Wall, 2015).

All participants agreed to be interviewed in locations of their choice. Altogether 15 individual interviews and one pair interview were conducted with the participants. The main data used for this article consists of these ethnographic interviews (e.g. Heyl, 2001) conducted by the first author. The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 min, the average length being 70 min each. These interviews were structured as informal discussions with no fixed questions (Heyl, 2001). All interviews were conducted in Finnish without an interpreter, to enhance uninterrupted relationships between each participant and the researcher. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by author one. The quotes in this article were translated from Finnish to English by the authors.

2.3. Data analysis

Ethnography is relational and reflexive (Coffey, 2018: 11-13; Lanas & Zembylas, 2015b; Wall, 2015), and the researchers shape the research. We have continuously and critically assessed our impact not only on the lives of the participants but also on the knowledge we produce through the research (Bolton, 2014; Coffey, 2018: 11-13; Lanas & Zembylas, 2015b). Such knowledge is essentially limited by what we, as researchers, can recognise. There is a constant risk of producing and validating (unequalising) normative assumptions and structures through our research while simultaneously finding strategies to interrupt them (Bolton, 2014).

The analysis was an ongoing process throughout the research (Coffey, 2018). The field notes and the interviews were analysed through a reflexive process of thinking with different theories inspired by and inspiring the fieldwork (Atkinson, 2017; Coffey, 2018; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). The topic of love for this paper emerged initially from the participants. The participants did not respond to the interview questions using the concept of love, nor were they asked specifically about how they approached love. However, their accounts repeatedly brought up something that could not be captured by other concepts and could be captured by theories of love. After this insight, we initiated an iterative analysis process that included three stages:

1. The first author read through the data multiple times and extracted all parts that were congruent with the theory of love.
2. The first author organised the data thematically, related to enablers or constraints of love. The analysis was confirmed by a participant-check (Candela, 2019), meaning the participants were invited to comment on the researcher's interpretation of their own interviews. Eight participants contributed, of whom all agreed with the interpretations, one made clarifications of details, and some emphasised incidents that they felt were important. These comments were integrated into the analysis.
3. These initial findings were then re-read in dialogue with the theory of love. In this thinking with theory -stage (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), the other two authors joined the first author to analyse the material with this theoretical tool.

Thus, altogether three analysts examined the data for themes and the potential bias of the initial analysis. Participant-checking was also used in the analysis stage. These methods enabled making visible how love emerges and becomes hindered in the lives of asylum-seeking unaccompanied children.

2.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were continuously assessed in relation to the individual participants, the situation, the places, time and emotions (Lanas and Rautio, 2014). This often resulted in adapting the plans for the research day according to what was going on right then in the participants' lives (Kaukko et al., 2017; Vervliet et al., 2015). Consent was acquired from the participants and the legal representatives. Interpreters were used with participants in discussions concerning the research procedures when needed. This was done to make sure all the participants' questions related to conducting the research were answered. Consent was seen as a continuous negotiation; not only could participants take part in the research as actively as they wish and retreat any time, they also decided how they take part: the locations and means of sharing were decided by them. The names of the participants reported in this article are pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves or by the authors.

3. Love and children in care

Due to its evocative nature, the word love is often shied away from when discussing the needs of children. Researchers on childhood tend to prefer the word care. The concept of care has its place in childhood studies, but the term has received critique for maintaining harmful positions and alluding to a one-way relationship: adults are the active carers and children are the objects of care (Goldstein & Lake, 2000; Kaukko et al., 2021). The theoretical perspective taken in this research positions care as a dimension of love, while arguing that simply giving care does not mean that our practices are loving (hooks, 2000). Love is needed because it extends beyond caring by including also choice, trust, respect, responsibility and knowledge of ourselves and others (Chabot, 2008; hooks, 2000; Lanas & Zembylas, 2015a). Because of this, love contains a stronger transformational power towards equity than care (hooks, 2000; Johnson, Bryan, & Boutte, 2019; Lanas & Zembylas, 2015a).

In this paper we look at love as actions that can be shared in various types of relationships (e.g. Chabot, 2008; hooks, 2000). Lanas and Zembylas (2015a) reasoned, love "*does not simply exist, it is brought to existence by doing*" (p.36). Love entails vulnerability and risk, and it is a voluntary choice based on ethical reasoning. This makes love a relational project rather than an internalised experience or a personal ambition. To choose to love is constant negotiation (Lanas & Zembylas, 2015a). Because love consists of voluntary acts of care, responsibility, respect and knowledge (Chabot 2008; Lanas & Zembylas, 2015a), creating reciprocal loving relationships necessarily requires time and an honest and open environment (hooks, 2000). As articulated by hooks, "*To know love, we have to invest time and commitment*", (hooks, 2000, p.114).

Chabot's (2008) definition of loving acts highlights the importance of being able to be not only the receiver of love but also giver:

> *"…loving acts are characterized by the will to give. Giving is a productive act that enhances the joy, insight, and ability of the giver as well as the receiver. […] by giving something of ourselves—our understanding, knowledge, possession, experiences, humor, sadness, and so forth—without focusing on what we receive in return, we enrich the other person. And by increasing the other person's sense of vitality, we allow her or him to become a giver as well, thereby expanding the power of both" (p. 812).*

Here, love should not be confused with the feeling of affection (Hinsdale 2012), and it is not seen as an emotion reserved to those close to us (Lanas & Zembylas, 2015a). More appropriately, love can be seen as a response to the other: '*loving dialogue and relationships with other people, other communities, other parts of the world, and other living creatures'* (Chabot, 2008, p.820). The concept of love highlights that we have an ethical responsibility to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibilities of response by others (Oliver, 2001).

Love does not take place in a vacuum, but within a particular social, historical and cultural context which supports it to various degrees. In this way, love is always also political: It is an embodied practice which

reflects societal power relations. Lanas and Zembylas (2015a) argued, "*while love is a choice that we make, our possibilities at how we make this choice are influenced by our social and political surroundings, which may either respond to us in loving way or not* […] *Love is a choice but the conditions for making this choice are not fair.*" (p.38). For unaccompanied children, the political nature of love is especially apparent. Due to their particular political surroundings, their right for giving and receiving loving acts is compromised.

In summary, the above-mentioned theories suggest that love is a choice of caring and respectful actions (Chabot, 2008; hooks, 2000; Lanas & Zembylas, 2015a). However, to respond to the critique of caring as building on and maintaining a one-sided power relationship, the theorization of love entails more than caring. Love exceeds caring especially in its inclusion of knowledge of ourselves and others and awareness of theorisations of power (Berlant, 2011; Chabot, 2008; hooks, 2000; Lanas & Zembylas, 2015a). In this paper, we are interested in how these children described their possibilities to build loving relationships, to give and receive love within institutional settings. Although several kinds of loving relationships (from romantic to family-like relationships) can form and develop in these settings, we mainly focus on loving relationships within families and between staff and the young people. The findings of this study are displayed in the following section.

4. Findings: Love in institutional settings

The participants drew the researchers' attention on how institutional practices, while meeting their needs for housing and legal protection, also limited their possibilities to maintain or create loving relationships. They also showed how, despite institutional, structural and policy limitations, they were able to create pockets of love in their everyday lives. We will showcase these below.

4.1. Difficulty of maintaining loving relationships

The most powerful institutional practice impacting the lives of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is the family reunification policy. Once asylum seeking children are granted a residency permit, it is unlikely they will be united with their primary caregivers. Family reunification is close to impossible in Finland (Hiitola & Pellander, 2019; Kuusisto-Arponen, 2016; Leinonen & Pellander, 2020) due to the family reunification procedures. Generally, the application sponsor (the person living in the resettlement country, i.e., the unaccompanied child) must be under 18 at the time of applying and in some cases, the family who wishes to be reunited in Finland needs to show they have a decent income (The Finnish Aliens act 301/2004). However, there are many additional procedures related to passports, the location of embassies where the applications can be lodged in, and the way in which the unaccompanied children have travelled to their countries of asylum (see also Kuusisto-Arponen 2016) that make the family reunion difficult to achieve. Of the participants of the study, four had reunited with their families. Only one, Aamina, managed to do this through a family reunification process. As she turned 18 during the process, she became a carer for her orphaned under-aged siblings. Another participant, Arman, explained the reasons for his failed attempt to be reunited with this family:

> Because in (a country) they have to wait for three … no one knows, like two or three months, and they don't even know if they are allowed in Finland, if the embassy will accept them or not……. They have no relatives or people they know. They have to live in a hotel, which costs a lot of money, if you have to stay there for three months. We don't have that kind of money. No one does.

Often unaccompanied children share a loving tie with someone living in their destination country. For unaccompanied children, these ties often represent the possibility of being close to someone they know from their previous lives (see also Herz & Lalander, 2017; Omland & Andenas, 2018; Wernesjö, 2015). However, institutional rules of restricted contact created obstacles for maintaining these relationships (see also Herz & Lalander, 2017; Kuusisto-Arponen, 2016). For example, Azad describes the trouble of seeing his siblings:

> At the beginning [on arrival in Finland], every week I visited my brother and my relatives. Here in the city, nowhere else. But there came a limit, that you can't go every week, only every other week. Because you go so much away from home. Then we say it is our brothers and sisters, we want to see them, and we feel better there than here. But they say you can't go any more……. For example, if I wanted to travel to visit my sister or I don't know somewhere else, they don't give permission to us right away. It takes two weeks. For example, if I ask today, I have to wait for two weeks for the answer. [They] say that we are busy, we have to work a little. We should write here, and then we send it to the boss. Then the boss decides whether you can go or not.

Some participants also wanted to live with their relatives, but institutional practices made this difficult. For example, Jamilah explained how she had requested to live with her family members, but it took two years of paperwork before the move was possible. This repeated when Jamilah's father and siblings arrived in Finland. Jamilah had to go through another procedure of applying, waiting and having regulated meetings, because she had been separated from them for so long. Similarly, Azad was not allowed to live with his adult siblings, who were already living in Finland when he arrived:

> They [counsellors] said that you cannot go there [to live with siblings], because they cannot have you there. Then I said my brother says he wants me [to live with him], but they say I am not allowed to leave. That we [referring to the counsellors] teach you how to live here in Finland.

Azad later clarified that the counsellors' view was based on the fact that the siblings had only lived in Finland for a short time, which is why they would not be the best teachers of 'how to live in Finland'. This implies that living in Finland requires a certain kind of (Finnish) lifestyle, in a certain kind of a family, or alone. Azad went to his brother without the institution's permission and was picked up and brought back to his living unit by a guard. He felt it was unfair that he was treated like a criminal for wanting to spend time with his family: "*I said, why do you act like this? Have I stolen something or done something bad*?". Similarly, Jamilah emphasises the negative effect institutional living has on her wellbeing:

> When I lived in the group home, I was bored sometimes. Not sometimes, every day I was bored……. Then I am in my room just looking at my phone. But not here now. I talk to my uncle, aunt and their children, and we laugh and play.

The separation from loved ones caused by institutional reasons can also be seen as 'administrative violence' (Leinonen and Pellander, 2020) against unaccompanied children. While loving professionals may, to a certain extent, fill the gaps created by the children's separation from their families, they do not replace those families. This has been repeatedly demonstrated also in other international (Omland & Andenas, 2018; Wernesjö, 2015) and Finnish (Kauko & Forsberg, 2018; Kuusisto-Arponen, 2016) research. The aim of institutional rules and practices is to protect the children. However, they overlook precisely what this research wants to bring attention to: love. The institutional practices limit the possibility to maintain the loving relationships these children had upon arrival.

4.2. Difficulty of creating loving relationships

Living in institutions limited not only the possibilities to maintain loving relationships but also the chances to create new loving

relationships. Although many participants shared their everyday lives with their transnational families and friends through virtual ties, some had lost their families or had no knowledge of their whereabouts. Especially in such situations, the counsellors were often the most available adults in the young people's everyday lives. However, simply being available did not automatically result in close or loving relationships (see also De Graeve & Bex, 2017). The living units existed simultaneously as two contradictory spaces: home for the children and workplace for the staff. This created a particular environment for creating loving ties with the most available adults.

Workplace indicates a set of laws, guidelines and cultural norms that do not apply to a home. This contradiction makes creating a family-like atmosphere in living units challenging. When discussing their relationship with the staff, the participants talked about the balance between personal and professional, home and work. For example, it is understandable that the staff were unavailable outside their work hours, but this was seen an obstacle in creating family-like ties with them, as explained by Bina:

> The only bad thing is that…it is not only this living unit, but probably a rule for the whole Finland, that counsellors can't keep in contact with their clients. Like I can't talk to her outside her working hours because I am their client. It doesn't matter how important she is to me, I can't talk to her, because it is not right by the law.

The counsellors emphasised the priority of the current 'family', i.e. the community of children and counsellors in the living units. This made some participants feel that their transnational family ties were downplayed. Some expressed that labelling the living unit community as family was superficial. For example, Bina could not view the community at the living unit as family. He described how, despite being told that this is their family now, '*…I never felt like this was my family*'. Similarly, Azad felt that the contradictory rules made it impossible to see the community as family. Referring to the staff at the living unit, Azad said: '*… not one time, not one time our father and mother behaved that way with us, like they behaved.*' In an ideal situation, all members of a family could love and respect one another.

Forming stable, loving relationships in institutions was further impacted by changing work schedules and repositioning of staff. Afzar described it like this: '*Well, yes, there were many good counsellors here, but they went away. Then you don't know if the new counsellors are good or shitty.*' As Afzar notes, it is not only the loss of good counsellors that made him feel stressed, but also knowing about the demand to re-negotiate new relationships with new workers in his said home, without knowing how long they will last.

All participants in this study had experienced relocations. Some had been placed in at least two living units, many in several. Each relocation meant the children had to start over the process of negotiating love in new relationships. Fawad was relocated seven times during his first four years in Finland. During that time, he attended four schools. He described his feelings about the relocations:

> [It feels] bad. All the time I have to move, it's not good…… Right away when I get to know the people, then soon there are new ones. Right away when I get to know them, there are the next ones.

Although Fawad's experience was the most extreme, all participants had experienced some changes. Changes in living circumstances, schools and towns were discussed as distressing. Moves caused broken relationships, some of which were difficult to replace. Aamina was upset when she was separated from her friend:

> First, I lived in a group home with [name]. Then she moved to a supported living unit, and I moved to another unit. And I am alone with all the boys. I don't like it.

These stories represent the contradiction between the realities of professionally run institutions and the needs of the children who live there. The community should be perceived as a home and family, yet it is against the principles of professionality to be such. The staff cannot always be available for the children, they may be abruptly separated from them due to organisational reasons. Love is not a professional requirement, but professional distance and impartiality are. Loving relationships need reliability and consistency. The experience of love requires more than a declaration to come alive - love is as love does (hooks, 2000). This means that a loving atmosphere cannot be achieved simply by giving the living unit a one-sided family-label. If it is not a family to the staff, it can hardly be a family for the children. In fact, calling an institutional power-based relationship with no temporal reliability a family, may be harmful to these children's long-term understanding of family.

4.3. Possibilities of engaging with love

Despite the barriers described above, the participating children and the professional staff were able to create 'pockets' of love together. The love created in these pockets was remembered as being of great importance later, like Afzar describes:

> Well, there [at the living unit] was a woman, she was like old, she was like my mother. Really, always she took care of…always asked, what do you need, Afzar, how can I help you? She talked, like my friend, just like a mother; she was like my mother … Always I remember her. She was just perfect.

The young people talked about professionals, mostly the living unit staff and teachers, who had taken the time to ask about the young people's feelings and needs and made themselves available to hear about their worries. These professionals had also shared their lives with the young people, making themselves more open, real and vulnerable in the situations with the children. For example, Bina was very close with his personal counsellor:

> Always when I feel bad or have another problem, we talk about how those things could be dealt with. And then I could say that I learnt life from her. She helped me so much, and, I don't know, it affected me so much, what kind of a person I am right now.

The presence of loving relationships was helpful for the long-term settlement of the children, for example as they were looking for housing and exploring opportunities to work or study. Most participants spoke nothing about their relationship with their legal representative, although they are the people who should ensure the best interest of each unaccompanied child. Those who mentioned them, said they only met for official matters. However, all participants had found ways to create close relationships, most often with others from migrant backgrounds. These relationships were not only hindered by, but also created in institutions, and they had a major role in creating a feeling of being loved, accepted, and respected members in their communities. For some participants like Azad, school felt like a loving environment. Having the familiar social connections at school helped him to keep a positive attitude.

> Also now, I always go to school. Always, I don't want to think about bad things and that they bother me. Always I want to think about good things and make jokes with every-one [at school].

All participants discussed how stressors connected to the asylum process had been lessened by loving relationships, especially when those relationships had lasted. Although the professionals did not replace family, many received praise for their willingness and ability to co-create loving relationships with the children. These relationships were not a 'gift' from the professionals, in which they sacrificed the balance between their professional duties and personal lives (see also Kaukko et al., 2021). Instead, these ties were created together with the children by choosing loving acts, respect, knowledge and mutual caring.

5. Concluding discussion

The findings of this research add to the existing research on love in young people's lives in significant ways. Most importantly, simply speaking about love in the lives of unaccompanied children is important (as shown by the participants of this research), but currently, almost non-existent in research (one exception being Kauhanen & Kaukko, 2020). This research is the first one shedding light to the experiences of love of unaccompanied, asylum-seeking children in institutional care.

In this research, as initiated by the young people participating in the study, we have focused on the possibilities of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to give and receive love in their lives in Finland. The stories of the participants show that the institutional practices made it very difficult for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to maintain and create loving relations in their lives (see also Kelly et al., 2021; Korkiamäki & Gilligan, 2020). This is especially alarming as one could argue these children are in a particularly vulnerable position and need especially reliable love (see also Evans, 2020; Kelly et al., 2021). While the international policies related to lives of unaccompanied children recognise the need of stability, possibility to maintain familial connections and creating loving relationships (Council directive 2013/33/EU, 2013; CRC, 1989; Liao, 2006), the institutionalised practices seem to fail at this.

The stories also show that despite the difficulties, the participants were, together with individual staff members, able to create 'pockets': moments, choices, feelings and acts of love. This means that the responsibility of securing the children's right to a stable, loving, family-like atmosphere (CRC, 1989; Liao, 2006), was left to temporarily available individuals. Here, it is crucial to realise that even though the individuals were able to overcome barriers of love (if only momentarily), this does not solve the problem of lack of love in these children's lives. It is merely a band aid. The lack of love in these children's lives will not be alleviated by placing pressure on the staff members to be more loving. This lack is not due to the staff members not being loving, but due to the contradictions between institutional and professional requirements on the one hand, and the children's needs for love on the other.

Instead, the practices and policies impacting unaccompanied children need to be critically evaluated, and an important dimension of this evaluation should be whether they foster love (see also Liao, 2006). The experience of love is individual, so these policies and practices should take the young people's personal needs into consideration (see also Kaukko & Wernesjö, 2017; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015). A crucial, but perhaps hard to achieve goal would be to reassess the strict family-reunification procedures in Finland. Another practical improvement would be the increase of family-based foster care in Finland. As love requires time to gain trust, respect and knowledge of each other (hooks, 2000), compared to larger institutions, foster homes could nurture more stable relationships, and better acknowledge the needs of individual children (Kalverboer et al., 2017; Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh, 2018). Asylum policies, regulations and legislation are slow to change, but some minor changes could significantly strengthen the feeling of love even in situations when the reunion is not possible, or changes in living situations are inevitable.

The concrete changes that would increase unaccompanied childrens' and youths' possibility to maintain and create loving relationships could be 1) supporting childrens' connections with family members and relatives already living in Finland. Living together with family or friends (if all parties wish so) should be made possible. 2) Stable housing options not tied to age or residency status would mean that unaccompanied children would no longer be relocated unless their studies or other personal reasons require so. 3) Unaccompanied children should be adequately heard when making decisions concerning them (see also Kaukko, 2017; UNICEF, 2018). All these changes would improve the wellbeing of unaccompanied children by increasing their possibilities of creating loving relationships.

The findings of this research should not be generalised to concern all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or institutions in which they live. Instead, the findings showcase how institutional decision making and practices may accumulate in young people's lives in ways in which their basic human right to experience love cannot be secured.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Iida Kauhanen: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Mervi Kaukko:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Maija Lanas:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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