Displaced Children

Displaced Person by Kurt Vonnegut is a short story whose setting is in Germany after World War II. The events happen in an abandoned airplane hanger, on the outskirts of a small town. The hanger has been transformed into an orphanage for a group of displaced boys, which was run by Sister Agnes and a group of nuns. Vonnegut takes the experiences of these boys, who have been displaced by war, to emphasize the plight of displaced children. It makes sense to focus on the special needs of displaced children for three reasons: first, the experience of displacement during childhood comes at a delicate time in life, when children are constructing their personal, family, and community identities; second, conditions of modern conflict and displacement target children in particularly harmful ways; and third, internal displacement raises issues of children’s rights and legal standing (“Internally”, homepage).

Displaced people are defined, by The United Nations, as “those who have been forced to leave their homes but remain in the same country (“Spotlight”, homepage).” The children in this movie have been uprooted during a very crucial and vulnerable period of their lives. This movie introduces Tobias, a displaced German/African-American boy; Peter, a displaced German boy, and many other displaced boys, who were only identified by their fathers’ homeland. For example, at the beginning of the
film there is a scene where the ex-German soldiers are watching the boys play soccer. There were references made about their nationalities, such as: “Look at them, a future German World Cup team, without a German amongst them.” “That one is Polish, that one is Belgian, and over there that one is Italian.” (Vonnegut). It is evident that these adults have no idea of the trauma that these boys have suffered.

The frequent ethnic and religious overtones these children were confronted with placed a special burden on them. For example, the Germans ridiculed Tobias by calling him the “Brown Bomber” and telling him to smile (Vonnegut), thus making fun of his ethnic background. Tobias has been separated from his family and community. Those relationships were the major source of his emotional and physical security. The most important factor contributing to his resilience is the opportunity for expression, attachment, and trust that should come from a stable, caring, and nurturing relationship with adults. Without these relationships, Tobias will continue to be vulnerable to continued exploitation.

The character of Peter also reminded the viewers of how harmful displacement can be to children who are uprooted from their families and communities. Adolescents such as Peter face particular problems. They are at a time of life when they are undergoing many physical and emotional changes. In some ways, they are more vulnerable than younger children since they recognize better the significance of the events unfolding around them. Many like Peter remember their families and slip into a state of depression and have increased levels of aggression and delinquency. For example, Peter knows the boys believe his every word, so he uses this power when telling them tales about their families. He seems to enjoy making
others as miserable as he is by making their families seem mean and thoughtless. He is also portrayed as a very aggressive boy in the film. This aggression may stem from the fact that he is the oldest and sees this as his role in his new displaced environment. Research indicates that the act of displacement itself—its disruption, insecurity, the loss of role models, and the experience of seeing adult protectors rendered powerless—can impair a child’s capacity for normal development (“Internally”, homepage).

Children’s rights are suppose to be guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These rights are nearly all put to risk by the poor conditions of displacement. These rights include rights to survival, protection, and development without discrimination. Sister Agnes and the other nuns tried to insure that these rights were secure, but they had very little support from the community. There was no mention in the movie that any agency other than the nuns were giving support to these children.

In conclusion, Displaced Person by Kurt Vonnegut makes a case for displaced children and their struggle to have a normal life. The number of displaced children has doubled over the last decade. This makes it imperative that communities worldwide need to reach them with needed aid, protect them from their oppressors, and find long-term solutions to their plight.
Works Cited


Vonnegut, Kurt. Displaced Person.