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## OPINION PIECES AND BRIEF POSITION PAPERS

### Walking Several Inches Taller: Student Reflections on a University Conference on the Lived Experience of Refugee Children and Families.

Rosie Walker<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> rwalker032@gmail.com, Acting Head of Department for Children and Families, University of Worcester

#### Abstract

The development of higher order thinking skills is an important pedagogic outcome of Foundation and BA degrees within the UK as it enables students to work positively with complex issues within early years practice. Our annual conference, held at a university within the West Midlands, is one strategy for this development. The conference under consideration was held in 2017 and was entitled 'Lived Experience of Refugee Children and their Families.' This offered students an experience of understanding at first hand the plight of refugee children and families and the implications for practice. At the end of the conference the students were asked to critically reflect on their experience and to present this as a 500 word piece of writing during the fortnight after the conference. Using a hermeneutic and interpretive approach to analyse the writing, three key themes emerged which included: the impact of learning through first-hand experience, changes in perspective previously informed by negative media coverage and developing politicisation and positioning of self as a result of the conference. Students identified a number of actions they would take as a result of their learning. The value of a critically reflective opportunity after conferences was highlighted as an essential part of developing higher order thinking and gaining maximum impact for the student learning from the experience.

**Keywords:** University conference, critical reflection, student learning, hermeneutics, written reflection

## Introduction

Higher Education (HE) programmes of professional development for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) play a key role in facilitating the ability of practitioners to provide high-quality services and outcomes for children and families (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2006, 2012). Two such degree programmes delivered within the UK are the Foundation Degree and the BA (Hons) Top Up degree. The Foundation Degree in Early Years is a nationally recognised vocational university programme at levels 4 and 5 where students are engaged in higher-level learning within both the Higher Education institution and the workplace; the learning in one environment embedded within the other. The Foundation Degree under consideration is a university degree course delivered through a partnership of 4 Further Education colleges delivered face to face across 7 campuses in England and a Flexible and Distributed delivery. The Top Up Degree, delivered by the university, provides a progression route from the Foundation Degree to achievement of a Bachelor's level qualification. This degree is offered as integrated working with children and families encompassing an age range of 0 – 19 and offers a multi-agency approach to working with children and families. Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche (2009) comment that within both degrees, knowledge and experience are inter-related to achieve high levels of skill and are influenced by guidance from the Quality Assurance Agency Higher Education (QAAHE, 2014a). The degrees are expected to have an effect in promoting self-directed learning and reflection on professional action. They enable practitioners both to acquire knowledge and to construct knowledge within their academic and work environments in order to deal with complex issues; in effect, encouraging students to learn how to learn and develop higher order thinking (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004). As Kolb (1984) has explained, a recursive model of learning through a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting can enable learners to enhance their ability to learn how to learn.

In the delivery of the courses at an HE institute of study within the West Midlands, one strategy for the acquisition of higher order thinking skills within both programmes is the annual 'student partnership conference'.

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A conference approach allows students to move beyond a focus on grades to building connections for their future and developing knowledge through dialogue.

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Walker, Reed & Sutton-Tsang (2017) highlight the importance of designing programmes that are contemporary, responsive to change and relevant to practice, and the conference lends itself to this agenda. Students, working collaboratively with tutors, lead the content and pace of the conference in order to build a community of practice whereby through passionate joint enterprise best practice can be explored (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Walkington, Hill & Kneale (2016), drawing on the work of Meyer & Land (2010) recognize being part of this community as a collective critical event or threshold experience for students potentially providing

transformational learning. Savin-Badin (2008, p.8) develops this view, explaining how a conference approach allows students to move beyond a focus on grades to building connections for their future and developing knowledge through dialogue: 'where the individual experiences some kind of shift or re-orientation in their life world.' Listening to a variety of speakers from different perspectives allows participants to construct their own values and opinions and find new ways of understanding the world. Thus, through the shared dialogue afforded by this conference learning, students have the opportunity to create new knowledge and understandings (Hatcher, Aalsburg Wiessner, Storberg-Walker, & Chapman, 2006).

The student conference seeks to offer students the opportunity for learning about contemporary issues within the field of Early Years, Humanities, Politics and Social Sciences within both the international and UK arena. One such prominent issue was the plight of refugee children and families whose situation was a daily feature within the media in the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe as they sought to flee to safety from war torn countries.

## Research Aims

In developing the annual conference, the Foundation Degree Partnership and the Top Up Team recognised that taking part had the potential to be a profound learning experience for many of the students. It would afford them the opportunity to consider and reassess their values in relation to understanding the lives of refugee children. However, as Lillemyr, Fagerli, & Sjøbstad (2001) point out, it is not enough to purely promote positive values. These must be supported by research to inform practice not only in respect of children and young people themselves but also in the institutions that support them. Mansfield (2014) argues that seeking the student voice in research practice can strengthen social justice practices and leadership. The research aimed to gather data from the voice of students attending. This would be analysed to identify and to disseminate the learning from the conference and the implications for practice. Thus, the students were invited to write 500 words critically reflecting on their experience of the conference. This was considered to be long enough to gain a picture of the experience but not too long as to be off-putting to students. The research considers what can be learnt from the students' reflections.

## Context within which the research took place

Bauman (2004) has recognised the scale of social changes and the impact this can have on society. Rutter (2006) calculated that at the time of her writing there were at least 60,000 refugee and asylum-seeking children of compulsory school age residing in the UK. In recent years, there has been a rapid expansion of children and families fleeing conflict and The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2016) estimate that there are currently 16.1 million refugees worldwide under their mandate. More than half are children, and six million are of primary and secondary school age. Although it is difficult to give a precise figure of how many children and families are currently residing in the UK, Prowle & Harvell (2017) estimate that 39,000 have entered the UK since 2016. During the academic year 2016/17 students on our courses were beginning to report that these families were accessing early years and children and family provision and requested that within their degree they would like input on how to understand and meet emerging needs. This resonates with Turton (2003, p.8) who suggests that forced migration asks us to think about such issues as citizenship, democracy as well as to look at ourselves and consider our responsibilities to the 'stranger amongst us, on our doorstep.' As Maher & Smith (2014) assert, early educators are in a strong position to work with children and families under the guidance of our national statutory frameworks. These are enshrined in the United Nations convention of the rights of the child as being at the heart of practice and take into account the uniqueness of each child and meeting their specific needs. Therefore, the consideration and dissemination of good practice in meeting needs within this arena is of key importance to students working with children and families. Greater knowledge in this area will enable students to make a positive impact on the lives of potentially vulnerable children and families at times of upheaval and transition with all the attendant emotional, social, economic and political issues this can bring. As Prowle & Harvell (2017) highlight understanding the impact of students as advocates for children of forced migration and how it affects children is essential for supporting children and families within settings. Block, Cross, Rees & Gibbs (2014, p.1351), researching a school support programme in Australia to establish a learning environment in which refugee children can be supported, discuss the need for raised awareness of the holistic needs of refugee students. In addition, 'active leadership participation' alongside community involvement is

needed to underpin positive improvements to practice in schools. This is reiterated in an exploration of evidence based practice strategies in the United States (Moinolnolki & Han, 2017) who also identify a welcoming school environment as key to supporting refugees successfully.

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...a powerful strategy in enabling students' wellbeing and alleviates a potential sense of helplessness.

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Such conferences as the annual student conference can provide a forum to explore these issues, particularly in highlighting tensions between state and local government responses and educational practice in terms of caring for children and families (Pinson & Arnott, 2007). The need to provide a mechanism whereby students could articulate their responses to the conference was assessed to be a powerful strategy in enabling students' wellbeing and alleviates a potential sense of helplessness as they listened to at times

harrowing and thought provoking information. Taking part in the research, gave students the opportunity to set down their thoughts and in doing so critically reflect on their response and disseminate their learning to a wider audience.

As Walker (2017) asserts, critical thinking requires an impetus that drives practitioners and educators to continue to develop and sustain their practice. In terms of early years, this is an overriding need to put advocating for children and families at the heart of practice. Such thinking requires pre-requisites of confidence, research skills, reflective practice and elements of mindfulness. According to Capel (2012) & Weare (2013), this involves awareness, and open-minded acceptance of the current situation while paying attention to the inner feelings this engenders without rushing to judgement and action. Rusche & Jason (2011) assert that critical self-reflection through writing can enable the development of student self-knowledge. The act of writing allows students to think critically about their views and the best lexicon to support them to absorb their learning and carefully consider their position within the world and their influence upon it. Writing about the experience, as Goodwin (1987) suggests, can allow students to reflect on their position within the broader structure of society. This may lead to the development of social consciousness and the making of a powerful positive contribution to society. Writing has the potential to capture the unique student voice on their perceived learning gains from their experience. Furthermore, as Barnett, Parry, & Coate (2001) and Barnett & Coate (2008) suggest, this interaction of self, knowledge and action which the conference experience and the opportunity for written reflection affords is fundamental to dynamic curriculum development.

Thus, a mechanism of written narrative discourse was used in order to enable students to articulate their thoughts and reflections after the conference (Harrison, Edwards & Brown, 2001). As Maher & Smith (2014) assert, citing Lather (1993), discourses around any topic are important, as they are instrumental in shaping and giving it perspective and parameters as well as defining attitudes and social assumptions.

## The Conference

The conference, attended by 150 students, built on a planned programme of learning and teaching work with refugee children and families. Prior to the conference, two members of the degrees team had worked with a local charity providing services to camps in Northern Europe. Two working visits had taken place to the camps, with a particular focus upon working with the children's centres there. Keynote speakers and workshop leaders for the conference were drawn from the children's centre manager and teacher at one of the camps and organisers of the local charity who had made several visits to the camps providing aid to relieve poverty. Internal staff and external guests with first-hand

experience of working and researching with refugee children and families facilitated seven workshops that supported the refugee focus. Workshops included: Challenging Assumptions; Global Safeguarding; Working in Refugee Camps; Supporting Children and Families; Political Issues; Grief, Loss and Change; Emotional Wellbeing of Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children and Play in Crisis. Although there is no incentive for students in attending the conference apart from the learning they gain from it, they are expected to attend as an integral part of their course. They are asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of the conference so that their learning, participation and satisfaction can be gauged. Although students do present at the conferences, at this particular conference, the students were attendees rather than presenters. This is because we wished to give the students input from those working on the ground with refugees and none of our students had this experience to offer at that time.

## The Research Design

The methodology adopts a hermeneutic and interpretive approach. A sample group of students were asked to articulate their experience as a critical reflection of the conference. These were analysed to ascertain what effect the experience of the conference had on student learning and development of practice. In this way, an attempt was made to deepen understanding of the impact of the conference. As Moules, Bell, Patton, & Morck (2012) suggest this approach allows students to be invited into learning in such a way that the content begins to matter to them and that there is applicability and utility to it. The approach values the experiential understanding that can be gained through student narrative. The potential to explore an experience that has made a lasting impression on students allows them to take a new positive stance on future issues they may deal with in practice. However, according to Gadamer (1998), in adopting such an approach, it is not only the text itself that has to be considered but also the interpretation of the researcher undertaking this to ensure that they do not put their own meaning onto the students' words. As a lone researcher, it was particularly important that this was considered carefully and methods of conducting the research constructed accordingly. In view of the need for an unbiased representation of the student voice within interpretation of the narratives it was necessary to have a critical friend (Kember, Tak-Shing, Lam, Lee, NG, Yan, & Yum, 1997). She did not attend the conference although is familiar with the programmes so was able to offer an objective view of the themes arising from the research. Austgard (2012, p. 832) highlights that the hermeneutic approach can lend itself to interpretation through basic patterns or 'keys that open up for a deeper understanding and meaning of the question asked.' She includes within this, thematic analysis which is the chosen method for this research. In order to achieve this, content analysis was used which, as Krippendorff (2004, p.18) states, 'is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use'

In order to invite participation, each attending student was given a letter explaining the research at a university study day that took place a few weeks before the conference. All the students who attended the day as all were invited to participate but those students agreeing to participate self-selected to do so. Therefore it could be argued that this was a random selection of students. Students were asked to provide an expression of interest in writing 500 words on their experience after the forthcoming conference by completing a form at the end of the letter. It was made clear to the students that making a decision to participate or not would in no way affect their grades for assignments. The researcher was positioned as an insider - outsider to this research (Hawthorne, 2016), not teaching the students who came either from partner colleges or from the Top Up degree. Eleven expressions of interest were received. These students were then emailed with further details of the research including timescales and arrangements for sending the work to the researcher. Respondents included eight female students and three males which broadly represents the

male/female ratio attending the conference. They ranged in age from mature to young with an age range of early twenties to fifties, and mostly professionally experienced (3 years or more and in paid employment) to a student who is currently training in placement.

Following the conference, the eleven students were reminded of their agreement to participate and the timescales. Some prompts for writing were provided as a starting point for students. These included: what did you attend during the day and why? What feelings did you come away with? What did you learn? What actions will you take as a result of the conference? This concluded with any reflections you would like to make on the day. The students were given three weeks to complete this. It was felt that students would be unlikely to respond after this time and that it was important not to keep requesting the 500 words. Students were told that there would be one reminder during the three weeks and once the deadline had expired, no contributions would be expected. In the event, seven students, six female and one male, responded promptly within a fortnight of the deadline and two further submissions, female, were received after this but before the deadline. Consent letters were provided to students explaining how their contribution would be used and how the publication should be developed. These were signed and returned by all contributing students. It should be noted that although a small number of students completed this reflective piece, 150 evaluation forms completed at the end of the conference indicated that the experience has significantly impacted upon their learning. Although the sample engaging in the writing for the research was small, the reflections completed by each have been powerful enough to gain some key findings.

The data gathered was transcribed, interrogated and coded into research themes. These included perspective changes as a result of their learning, actions taken as a result of their learning and the development of a more politicalised stance to the plight of refugees. Each participant was given a pseudonym and their contribution was read several times and colour coded into themes relating to the impact of the conference. These included changes in thinking, learning and action. These were represented on a reduction grid indicating which participant made the specific comments. The critical friend reviewed the original contributions and subsequent discussion revealed that consistencies in the themes emerged. It was interesting to note that although the participants differed in age and professional experience as defined above, all highlighted significant transformational learning as having taken place.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The contributions provided a wealth of material: the students had chosen their words carefully and with passion on some occasions to reflect their position. It was evident that the writing exercise had given students the opportunity to reflect on the different perspectives, asking questions of themselves and others and gaining new insights through reflection on self within the context of the experience. This has proved to be transformational in all nine pieces of writing as reflected within all the themes identified.

Three key themes emerged from content analysis: experiential learning, perspective changes and taking action as a result of learning. A further more unexpected theme was that of the politicisation of the students through insights they may not have gained without the conference. The themes are considered using the actual words of the participants whose names have been represented by pseudonyms.



## Learning through Experience

A key approach taken during the conference was to enable students to understand at first hand the plight of refugees and what life is like within the camps for the refugees.

“The conference was an eye opener to say the least: it educated me about what it has been like for refugees.” (Alison)

“I learnt much about the everyday practicalities of life in a camp.” (James)

All nine students indicated that the experience enabled them to respond with empathy that allowed them to understand the challenges faced by refugees living within the camps and the trauma of their journeys to the camps.

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empathy.”

“I had the privilege of being part of a group that met with a Syrian refugee. That person was able to talk about their experiences and really helped us to understand the awful events that children are going through on a daily basis.” (Anya)

As Early Years educators they resonated, for example, with the lack of facilities for children to play and explore the world around them. The impact on children’s physical and emotional development because of conditions at the camps was explored.

“Childhood is robbed from children and access to play, which is essential for their development, is restricted because of the many hazards.” (Tia)

However, the empathetic feelings this engendered did not overwhelm the students as the writing shows a constructive response in developing their thinking. The content of the day mattered to the students on an emotional level and some powerful emotions were expressed.

“Emotions began to assert their presence over my conscious mind ...Shocking...Devastating ... The brutal realities and injustices of the situation ... brought almost to the point of tears ... the entire auditorium was silent.” (James)

However, they were able to apply their learning to considering personal and professional approaches to future practice. This may in part be due to the academic context surrounding the conference as a learning arena that allowed purposeful action to be considered. Entering the lecture hall at the university was cited as exciting but not without apprehension.

“I have never attended a conference before and felt excited, apprehensive and grateful to be invited to attend as part of studying for my early years degree.” (Naomi)

Understanding the realities of life at the camps and the life stories of those at the camp enabled students to realise that many refugees are from professional and well-educated backgrounds. Students indicated that the media had fuelled previous perceptions. This was one of the most written about aspects of the conference presentations and the biggest factor in transforming students’ thinking. For them to listen to an individual who had first-hand experience was a revelation and powerful learning experience. This gave students a personal account as well as a wider appreciation within the global context. Through first hand shared experience and critical self-reflection, students were able to see how their values had been influenced by media coverage of the

refugee crisis. Negative media portrayal of the situation was freely discussed by all the nine students who felt that this had been instrumental in shaping their previous views. They realised that the media does not always give a first-hand account of lived experience but is a forum from which they receive someone else's interpretation of a situation. Sharing the refugees' stories has enabled students to challenge their assumptions, become a more critical readers and listeners, and engage with different sources to gain information. Rather than take media at face value they have realised that information is filtered and sometimes manipulated and it is important to listen as much to what people do not say as to what they do say. This was an important issue for many students. As Jane and Anya recall

"Before the conference I only knew what was in the papers and on the news, which is not always factual. For example, I was not aware that other countries have taken on more refugees than the UK. The information at the conference has completely changed my perception and opinion." (Jane)

"The conference really helped by showing the true picture from the point of view of the people who are actually there." (Anya)

Through personal studies, the students have been able to piece together a construct and a wholeness that the media cannot always give. The significance of this learning is that when they come to the media to look at a different issue it is possible that they will look at this differently. Such a meta-awareness and engagement with different sources of knowledge thus changes their interface with knowledge. Conferencing can be a powerful mechanism to support students' way of being as advocates for social justice and understanding a construct of what things are really like for people, challenging sources of knowledge and critical reflection not accepting things at face value as Rusche & Jason suggest (2011). Mia explains how the first-hand accounts altered her perspective

"As we listened intently to the stories of people the speaker had encountered I realised what an astonishing contrast it was to what we had heard and seen in the newspapers and media. This was first-hand experience and much more believable." (Mia)

From this empathetic stance and from a position of confidence in their new found knowledge and perception changes, students began to expound on understanding the pertinent theoretical aspects they need to consider within current national frameworks to support children and families. These included Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, attachment, bereavement, play, developmental norms and mental health. This is exemplified in the following statements: Naomi and Suzie's accounts illustrate the student's developing understanding of meeting basic needs

"I developed a better understanding of how one aspect of a child's life (access to food, safety, shelter, family) can have a detrimental effect of their development and outcomes for later life." (Naomi)

"If we think that we can solve the underlying issues by education of children alone, we are thinking of the impossible. We must deal with issues such as hunger, lack of clean water and hygiene before we expect people to concentrate and learn." (Suzie)

## Perspective Changes

As Walkington et al. (2016) and Meyer et al. (2010) discuss, students may transform their learning as a result of making new meanings through use of threshold concepts: "the jewels in the curriculum" (Meyer & Land 2006:198). These can be seen within the students' writing in all nine submissions.



They fall into two categories: the understanding of the wider context of migration and 'what our responsibilities are to the stranger in distress, the stranger amongst us, on our doorstep' (Turton 2013, p.8) and in relation to refugee health and wellbeing.

In terms of the wider context, students talked about a lack of understanding about global migration and the motivation of refugees. For example Jane explains

"I will admit before attending the conference I couldn't understand why people would put their children as well as themselves in danger in order to get to another country so far away." (Jane)

Through explanation of why the refugees wanted to reach the UK, students began to find a different perspective as Jane writes

"If nothing else the conference helped me to realise that these people are not wanting to come and live in our country for the sake of it or because they think it's a nice place. They want to feel safe and secure and are ordinary people just like me and you." (Jane)

Using this new knowledge and insight, the students were able to consider the feelings of refugee children and families and the impact this may have on their lives both within a refugee camp and beyond

"These families have gone through hell and one of the things that really upsets me is the thought that the children will find it incredibly difficult to feel safe and to feel as though they can trust someone; without feeling anxious and not knowing whether something of theirs will be stolen or their home will be taken away from them or what's worse, a loved one." (Alison)

Comprehension of the effect of trauma on children's lives allowed understanding to emerge about the accompanying emotions that children and families may feel. This is important to their practice because it allowed a spiral of reflection where students make connections between their learning experiences and the learning of the children with whom they work (Canning & Callan, 2016). Quality reflection allows for a better understanding of the family and culture and allows students to acknowledge the impact of their influence on children's learning and development as Frances attests

"The workshop leader described aspects of trauma resulting from experiences of war which can result in a child experiencing emotional responses such as anxiety, fear, sadness, disbelief and anger." (Frances)

The second area of practice where students indicated the most perspective change was in considering the emotional well-being of children and families. All nine students discussed this in their writing. This is perhaps an aspect where students felt on surer ground as they had dealt with children suffering adverse life experiences within their settings. They were able to highlight examples where they felt they could help refugees within the context of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Department for Education, 2017) framework. However, where the experience impacted on students was in deepening their understanding from a variety of perspectives: parents, children and professionals. Students were able to position themselves to see all sides of a situation whilst acknowledging their own values and beliefs.

"I learnt about the implications of traumatic events affecting parents' ability to care for and fulfil their child's emotional needs. I feel inspired to make a positive impact on children's lives, and determined to provide the continuity, care and emotional support needed for children in my care to flourish and enjoy life." (Naomi)

## Action as a result of perspective changes and gaining new knowledge

All nine submissions critically reflected on how the learning at the conference had highlighted the benefits of taking action in a small way. The conference speakers all emphasised how small actions can be important and can have far-reaching impact.

“ ... The academic framework of the conference ensured that the actions were realistic and not borne out of misplaced passion. ”

The actions identified by the students that they would like to take forward into practice ranged from those directly to assist refugees within camps and actions within settings that could be taken if a refugee family or child came to their setting. The academic framework of the conference ensured that the actions were realistic and not borne out of misplaced passion. This resonates with the mindfulness discussed by Weare (2013) and Capel (2012) which incorporates an awareness, and open-minded acceptance of the current situation while paying attention to the inner feelings this engenders without rushing to judgement and action. The response was measured and fitted the student's role as practitioners and educators. For

example, two initial responses talked of going over to the camps but then realising that with family commitments this may not be possible or indeed helpful.

Actions stated across a range of responses included:

- ❖ Providing a safe place to care for and nurture children within our settings: a safe place to disclose personal feelings, asking questions about provision within settings;
- ❖ Passing on information learnt to prepare settings and to plan for children coming to the setting;
- ❖ Engaging in dialogue with local Member of Parliament to secure more resources;
- ❖ Ensuring continuity of care and, security and routine within setting;
- ❖ Being flexible to cater for children's interests and needs, being sensitive to behavioural issues;
- ❖ Challenging assumptions and myths about refugees and spread a positive image through conversation and social media;
- ❖ Promoting more understanding of mental health issues.

These resonated in some respects with the findings of Block et al, 2014 and Moinolnolki & Han, 2017.

## Politicisation: insight students would not have gained without the conference

Student reflection on their position within the broader structure of society can lead to the development of social consciousness and the making of a powerful positive contribution to society (Goodwin, 1987). Student reflection on their position within the broader structure of society can lead to the development of social consciousness and the making of a powerful positive contribution to society. This was a powerful aspect of their written reflection. Students had time within the days following the conference to absorb their learning and construct their response. As Ruche & Jason

(2011) suggest the development of self- knowledge through this process has enabled development of a positioning of themselves within the crisis and a politicalised approach to the situation. As Pinson (2007) asserts, such a forum as the conference can expose the tensions between government responses and the response on the ground to the daily realities of working with potentially vulnerable people. The reactions of the students expressed below contrasted with their response to the actions they plan take on the ground highlight this tension.

“The key message for me is the pitiable response of the UK to this crisis has been shameful. A country with such material riches and cultural diversity simply cannot ignore the plight of people in such dire straits and emotional turmoil. It was incredible to see how, despite our own government’s inaction, people have taken it upon themselves to stand up and tackle these issues.” (James)

“Attending the conference made me realise how global political issues can impact on children’s lives and the importance of practitioners supporting children to minimise disruption to their development and outcomes in later life.” (Suzie)

The data suggests that the message that students overwhelmingly took away from this conference is that they can make a difference no matter how small and allowed them to ‘walk several inches taller’ as a result despite perceived government inaction and negative media portrayal.

“I actually felt better, capable and empowered after this conference.” (James)

## Implications and Limitations

This is a small scale piece of research which is limited due to its reliance on a small sample of student writing from the conference. Nevertheless, the data is sufficiently rich to be able to draw some worthwhile conclusions from it although these could not be generalised and may not be replicated should such research be carried out at further conferences. The benefit of this type of research is that it aims to reduce the potential power differential between students and tutors and allows participants to have a voice in the generation and analysis of the data.

The data has shown that for future instructional design of Higher Education courses, consideration of provision of forums where experience is articulated and presented at first hand to students is important. This enables students to have a rich and sustained learning experience. However, in order for the opportunities this affords to be maximised it is essential for space for critical self-reflection shortly afterwards to be an integral part of this provision. Requesting this in a written form allows students time to absorb their learning and to own a considered response.

For policy makers, the tension between government response to the refugee situation and the response on the ground to caring for children and families in crisis needs further consideration in order to ensure that true compassion can be translated into meaningful action.

The implications for future research within Higher Education include a wider scale project to ascertain the long term benefits to practice as a result of student conferences.

## Conclusion

Walker (2017) has highlighted that in order for sustainable critical thinking to be in place there needs to be an impetus which drives this forward. In the case of early years this is placing children and families at the heart of practice and being in the responsible position of advocating for them in order

to ensure that their needs are met and the best outcomes are achieved. This is evident in the responses to the refugee conference where the need to place the needs of children and families at the forefront of practice and advocate for them was highlighted by each respondent. This research suggests that in order for sustained and transformational learning to occur there also needs to be opportunity for critical self-reflection on the experience. However, further research is required with a greater sample of students and graduates in order to test the validity of this very small scale piece of research.

Current research from Prowle & Harvell (2017), Block et al (2014) and Moinolnolki & Han (2017) suggests that once children have settled within a safe country, the full impact of what they have experienced begins to emerge and it is at this time that staff need to be especially alert and understanding. This is why it is so important to have students who have a realistic understanding of what they have been through, and can use this information to support their work with children on a one-to-one and group basis.

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