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Conference

Response to the 21st Kilbrandon Lecture

Shumela Ahmed

Abstract:

Shumela Ahmed's response to the 21st Kilbrandon Lecture presented by Phil Scraton: Resisting the Marginalisation, Regulation, and Criminalisation of Children and Young People.

Response

I'd like to begin by acknowledging what a special venue this is tonight [the Barony Hall at the University of Strathclyde]. It is a great privilege to both speak here this evening and to follow such an authentic and very meaningful, but also particularly heartfelt lecture from Phil Scraton.

This evening's lecture was about the marginalisation and criminalisation of children and young people in this country. But I want to talk to you about another '-isation' - the traumatising of children and young people in this country, which will often be at the hands of the state.

I was one of those children and as a young person, I was often described as disruptive. It was often written down about me or said directly to me by teachers, social workers, and the police- because I was disruptive, very disruptive.

And that's because I was reacting and responding to the complex trauma, the poverty, and the other adversities that I was living. It was chronic, it was cumulative, and it was interpersonal. My reaction to that trauma, to that adversity, was really, very normal. It was a normal, natural response, and it was just my life. Unfortunately, there wasn't someone like Phil Scraton on the sidelines saying: 'That is trauma, that is adversity'. 'They' are going to marginalise you for this in the future. 'They' may even lock you up for it. It was just the life I lived. And that's exactly what is happening, and has continued to happen, to our children and young people in Scotland. They're reacting to the adverse, traumatic and at times absolutely horrendous and devastating circumstances they experience. But it's just 'their life'. Yet we continue to - and as Neil



[Hunter]¹ mentioned, it's on the rise -marginalise, criminalise, and even institutionalise our children and young people for it.

I know this story only too well. And so instead, I think what we should be doing, rather than criminalise, marginalise, and institutionalise is actually realise the widespread prevalence and impact of complex trauma in this country. In Scotland, one in five adults in this country have lived experience of complex trauma in childhood. (NES, 2018). And that childhood complex trauma is either physical or sexual abuse.

We should be responding in new ways that are recognising that there is a different way to do this, as has been mentioned by Phil and Neil this evening and by [CYCJ](#), as I often like to say, are a beacon of light in showing us how to do good research and policy working alongside children and young people who are in conflict with the law. We all just need to get better at implementing that research and policy through the full system, and not just the criminal justice system- all systems. And absolutely through a trauma lens.

And we should, at all costs be resisting the re-traumatisation of children and young people whenever they come into contact with the system, all systems, and all parts of those systems.

Lastly, I would like to finish with a message of hope.

As I mentioned earlier, I was often labelled as a disruptive young person. Yet now in adulthood with two degrees under my belt, six years at university, and a successful lived experience led organisation, I'm often called a 'disruptor' by other people. 'Oh, you disrupt leadership thinking Shumela, you disrupt how we think about organisations and systems when you come in and deliver training in the way that you do'.

Yet as a child that label of disruptive was what got me marginalised. It was ultimately what got me criminalised and what absolutely re-traumatised me time and time again- often at the hands of the system. What kind of message does that send to our young people? How very confusing. And not just for a young person: I still get quite confused by it to this day.

So rather than marginalise, rather than criminalise or traumatise children and young people, let's humanise them - or re-humanise them, actually, in many cases. Let's ask not what's wrong with this child, what's wrong with these young people, but what happened to this child? What happened to these young people. Those children we can often be so quick to label as disruptive. Let's help them understand now, and I mean right now! - as we walk alongside them, and their families, and their communities, let them know that, in fact, they are the disruptors that we need in our future.

¹ Neil Hunter is CEO of the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration <https://www.scra.gov.uk> and also spoke at the Kilbrandon Lecture.



Every one of those kids has the potential to stand here on this stage and respond, just as I have tonight. And we need to make sure that they know that. We cannot just hold on to that hope in our minds and hope that it happens for them. They need to know and feel that hope, too.

I want to thank Phil Scraton for his wonderful lecture this evening and Neil Hunter for his response, CYCJ for the opportunity to be here tonight and talk to you all and CELCIS for hosting. Thanks so much for listening. I hope you all have a wonderful night.

References

NHS Education for Scotland (NES) & Scottish Government (2018). *Opening Doors: Trauma Informed Practice for the Workforce*. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/274703693>

About the responder

Shumela Ahmed is the co-founder and managing director of the Resilience Learning Partnership. She has a background in community education. Shumela directs the work of a lived experience led organisation and her ambition is to see lived experience as the central force within public policy design and implementation within public and third sector services. Resilience Learning Partnership is an education and training provider which supports the health, social care, education, housing & criminal justice sectors in trauma-informed practice.

