

# ‘Will to survive’: the lives of young people with ‘no papers’ in the UK

---

**HSWTP Research conference 2022**

14 June 2022

Dr Yeşim Deveci

[y.deveci@uel.ac.uk](mailto:y.deveci@uel.ac.uk)



# ‘just hope and the will to survive’

---

- research project overview
- portrait poems: Ahmed and Precious
- findings and implications: overcoming barriers through engaged praxis





# ‘no papers’

---

- ‘no papers’ used by young people to describe their precarious immigration status
- ‘undocumented’ and ‘irregular status’ refer to persons who do not have the right to remain in the UK
- irregular immigration status; refusal of asylum applications ‘end of the line’, visa overstaying, bureaucratic failures in processing immigration applications and, to a lesser extent, unauthorised entry (Sigona & Hughes, 2010; 2012)
- being undocumented is “one stage in a fluid process between different types of status” Bloch and McKay (2017:71)
- immigration status is relevant and significant because it defines the rights, or lack of rights associated with a particular status.

# the study

---

- doctoral research project grew out of 15 years' experience of working with young refugees and migrants in an urban context
- aim to understand more about the lives of young people without authorised status in the UK
- fieldwork with young people took place in London between April 2016 and January 2017

what are the hopes and dreams,  
everyday lives and life histories of young  
people living in the UK with irregular  
immigration status?

- what stories do these young people tell about their lives?
- how do they live their lives?
- how do they imagine their futures?



# methodology

---

- awareness of precarity of participants circumstances and the importance of relationships in sustaining work together
- multiple meetings over time to enable the development of a relationship between researcher-participant
- meetings present (everyday life), past (biography/ life histories), future (hopes and dreams): unstructured and semi-structured interviews and creative activity
- analysis: immersion, coding and creative analytic practices
- research project grounded in a psychosocial relational approach informed by practice experience, Black feminist and decolonial thinking

n = 7

name	age (gender)	country of birth	arrival in UK	occupation
Ahmad	23 (male)	Afghanistan	age 14	barber
Rayaan	19 (male)	Bangladesh	age 9	casual work
Precious	17 (female)	Nigeria	age 14	student
Sarah	22 (female)	Jamaica	age 8	volunteer
Sekou	25 (male)	Guinea	age 17	various/ student
Tommi	20 (male)	Jamaica	age 3	performance artist/ fashion
Mohammed	25 (male)	Afghanistan	age 14	tailor



# Ahmed

---





# Precious

---



# key findings

---

- young people live their lives on a continuum of resistance to death ('no papers') and movement towards life
- their aliveness or closeness to death impacted by multiple psychological and socio-political factors
- they live their lives in and through relationships
- as practitioners we have choices about how we engage with these young people
- our interventions may be helpful and/or detrimental for their safety and well-being



# implications for professionals

---

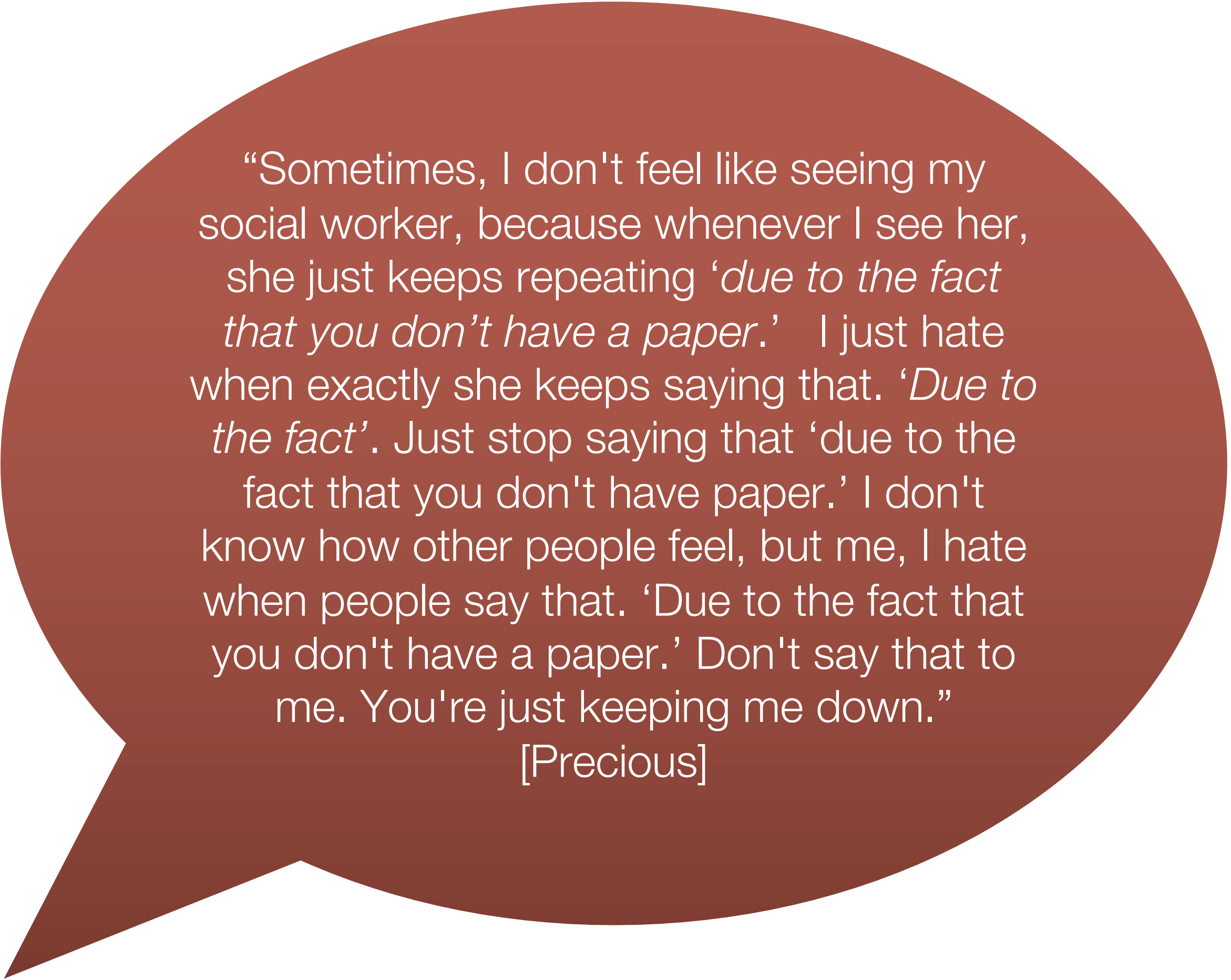
necessity of engaged praxis  
for overcoming barriers

‘ethical, self-aware,  
responsive and accountable  
action’ (White, 2007: 226)

- justice
- listening to understand
- dignity







“Sometimes, I don't feel like seeing my social worker, because whenever I see her, she just keeps repeating ‘*due to the fact that you don't have a paper.*’ I just hate when exactly she keeps saying that. ‘*Due to the fact*’. Just stop saying that ‘due to the fact that you don't have paper.’ I don't know how other people feel, but me, I hate when people say that. ‘Due to the fact that you don't have a paper.’ Don't say that to me. You're just keeping me down.”

[Precious]

# the immigration line *is* a barrier

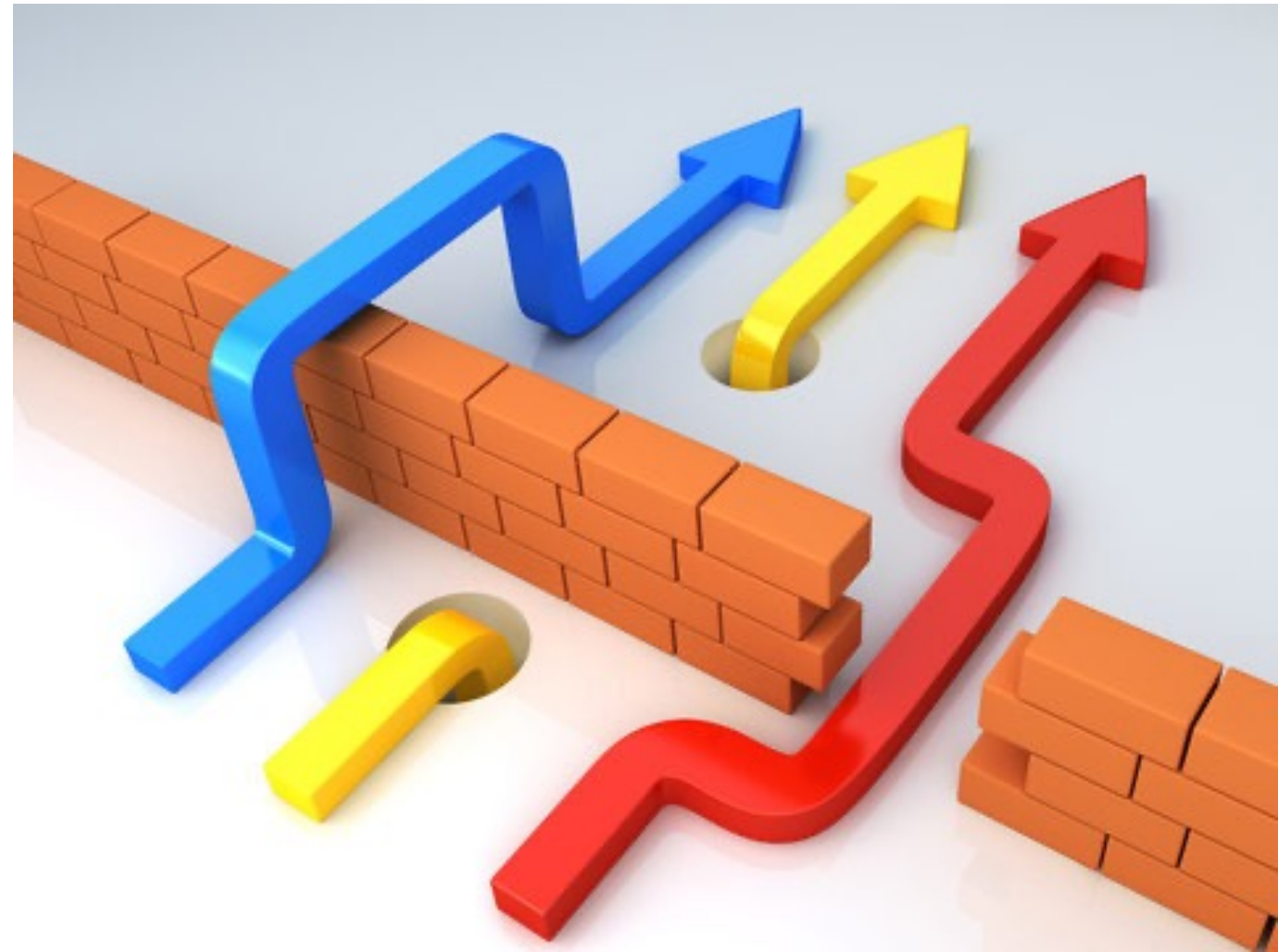
---

- “The immigration line demarcates those lives that are endowed with the gift of citizenship and those lives that can be cut short with impunity.” Back (2007:31)
- young refugees and migrants are subject to UK immigration control
- immigration control is a racialized, dehumanizing process
- in a hostile environment state actors are positioned as border guards (Yuval-Davis *et al*, 2019)
- it is necessary to actively embody a radical alternative to protect children and young people from harm

# social work for social justice

---

- knowledge is power; **understand the legal and policy framework** that impacts those you are working with
- be prepared to **challenge ill-informed or poor decision-making**
- if in doubt **seek legal advice; build a network** of good quality solicitors and legal advisers.
- **stay abreast of changes in immigration policy and practice** by subscribing to relevant newsletters and engaging in knowledge sharing forums.
- build **strong working relationships with professionals** in local education, health, social care, youth and community services
- **connect with organisations and individuals with relevant expertise** in working with children and young people subject to immigration control and groups campaigning for systemic justice.





# necessary knowledge

Legislation and policy: The Coram Children's Legal Centre

<https://www.coram.org.uk/how-we-do-it/coram-childrens-legal-centre-upholding-childrens-rights> and Just for Kids Law

<https://www.justforkidslaw.org/what-we-do/empowering-young-people/legal-support/immigration>

Subscribe to newsletters: Free Movement

<https://www.freemovement.org.uk> and Coram Migrant Children's Project

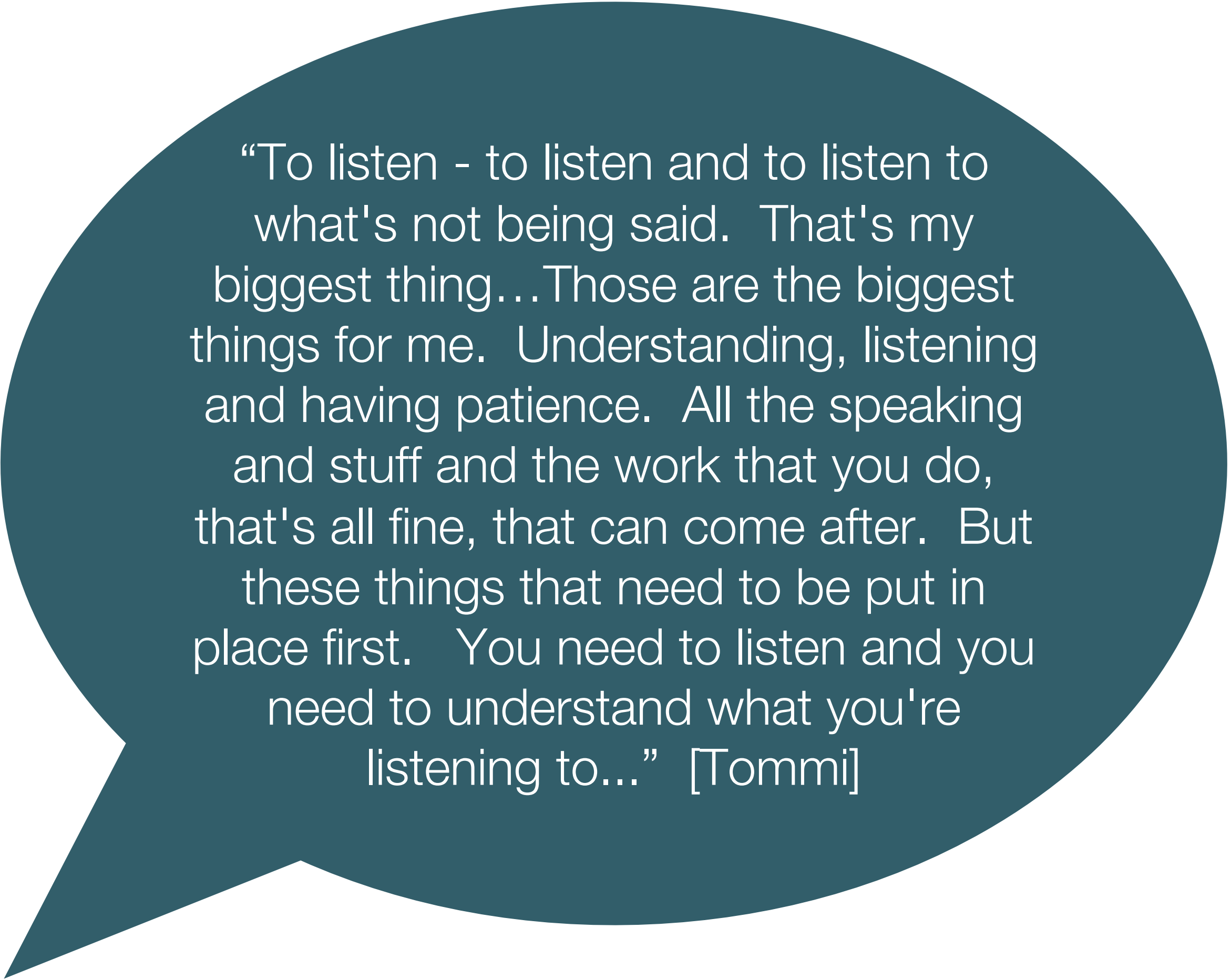
<https://www.childrenslegalcentre.com/about-us/what-we-do/migrant-childrens-project/> have regular newsletters with the latest news and information relation to immigration and migrant children.

Find and follow campaigning organisations: e.g. on Twitter to connect with others in the field. For example, Against Borders for Children

<https://www.schoolsabc.net> Project for the Registration of Children as

British Citizens <https://prcbc.org> Right to Remain

<https://righttoremain.org.uk>



“To listen - to listen and to listen to what's not being said. That's my biggest thing...Those are the biggest things for me. Understanding, listening and having patience. All the speaking and stuff and the work that you do, that's all fine, that can come after. But these things that need to be put in place first. You need to listen and you need to understand what you're listening to...” [Tommi]

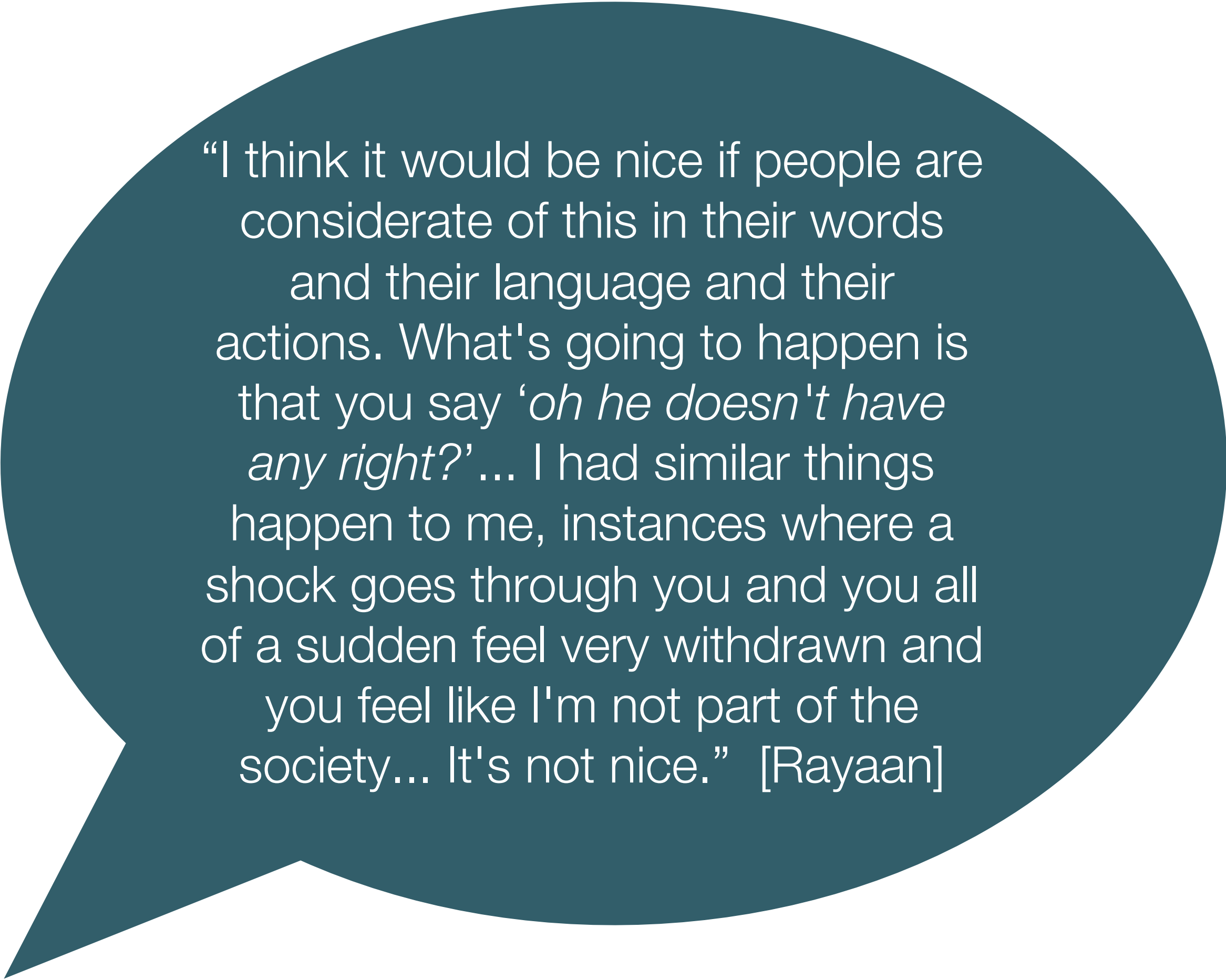
# listening to understand and overcome barriers

---

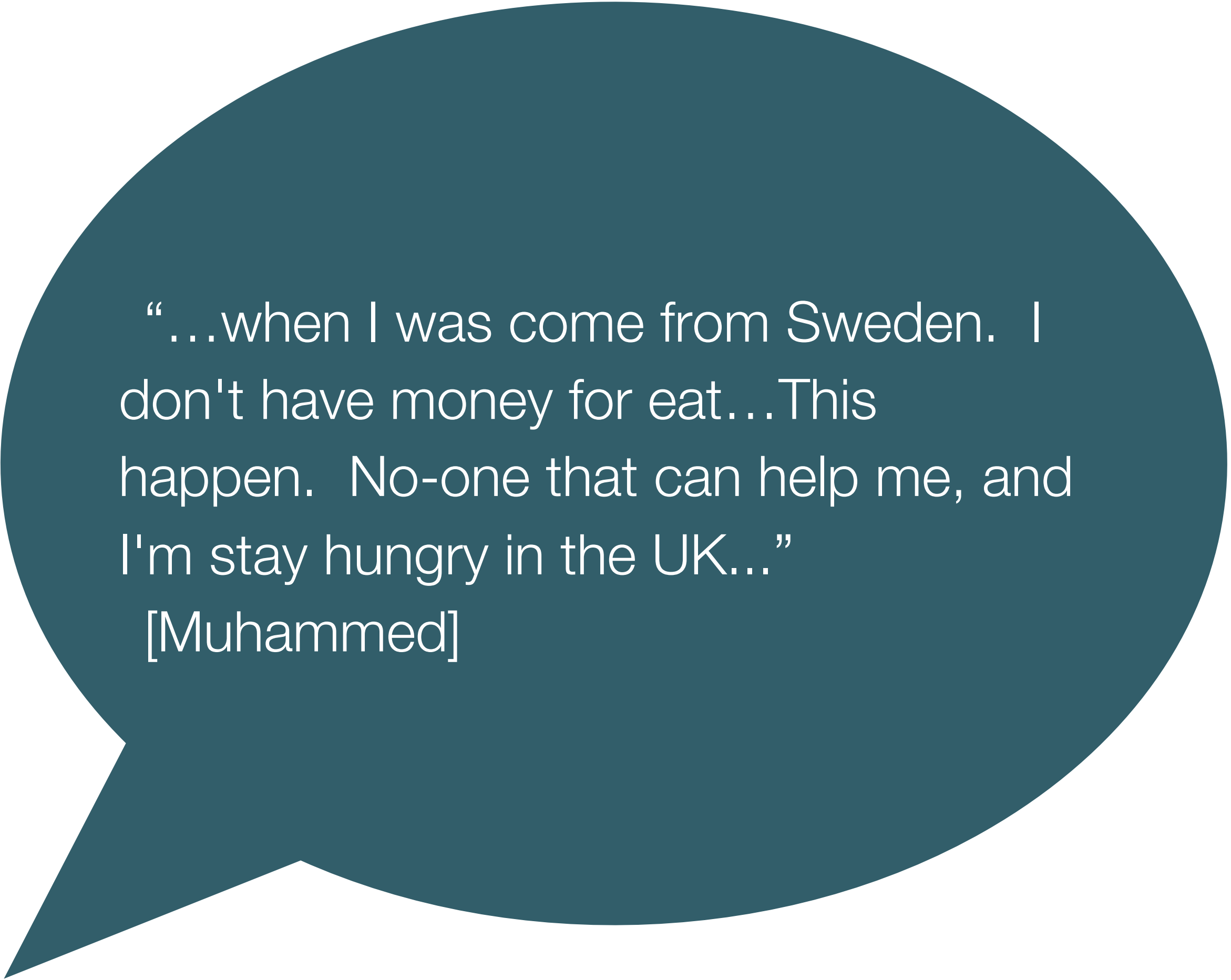
‘listening to understand’ offers

- a way into dialogue
- the possibility of an equitable relationship based on human dignity
- a counter-practice to the oppressive positioning of powerful state actor (practitioner) and powerless victim/criminal (young person)
- ‘bearing witness’ (Blackwell, 1997) to the wholeness of a person’s experience, the ‘thick stories’ (Kohli, 2007)





“I think it would be nice if people are considerate of this in their words and their language and their actions. What's going to happen is that you say ‘*oh he doesn't have any right?*’... I had similar things happen to me, instances where a shock goes through you and you all of a sudden feel very withdrawn and you feel like I'm not part of the society... It's not nice.” [Rayaan]



“...when I was come from Sweden. I don't have money for eat...This happen. No-one that can help me, and I'm stay hungry in the UK...”  
[Muhammed]

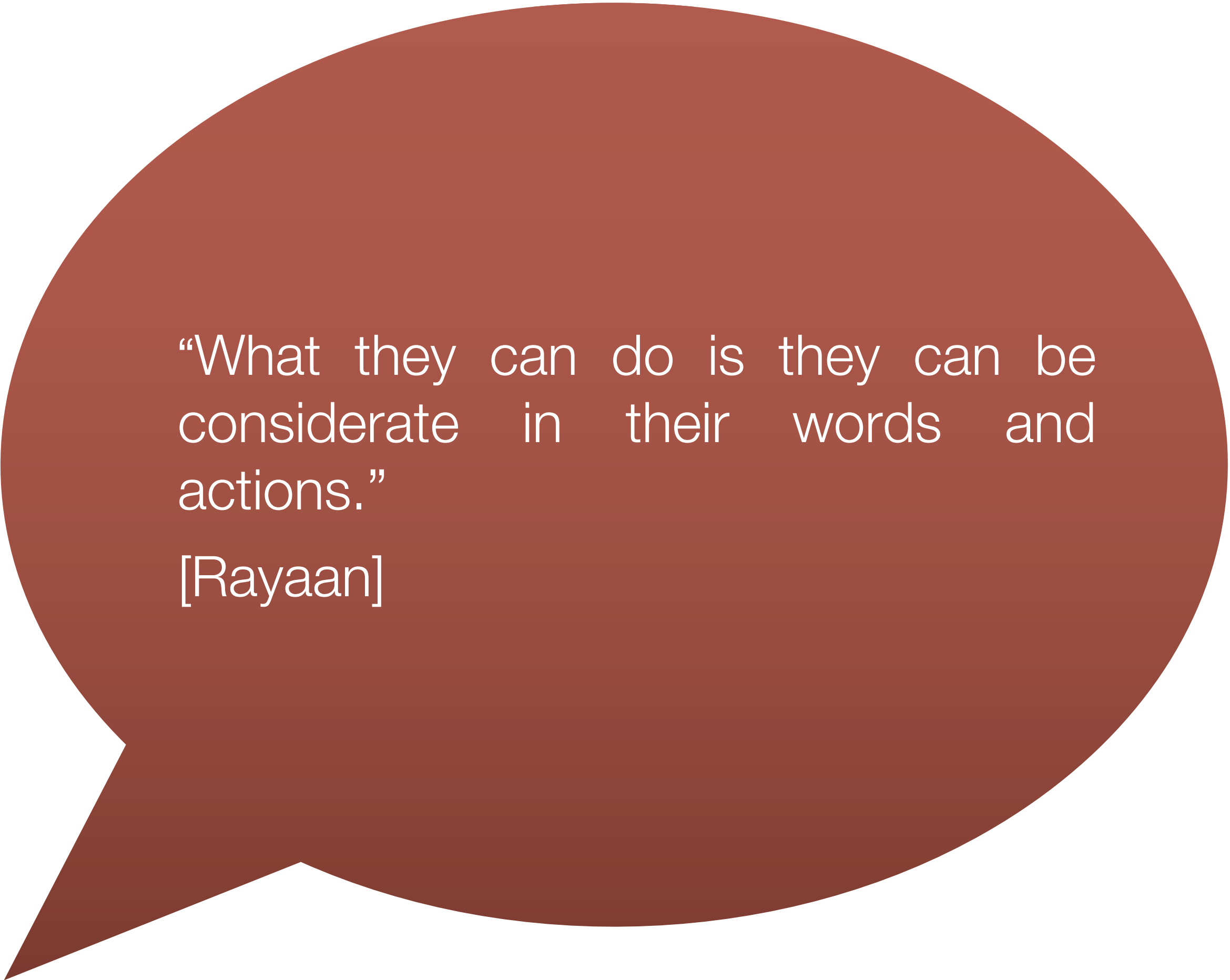
# Dignity (Article 1 UN Declaration of Human Rights)

---

**“What a precious thing it is to be able to preserve your dignity** when going through difficulties. Precious to you and your sense of self. The problem is that when you are going through crisis **it is not always within your own power to preserve your dignity. That power can too often lie in the hands of someone else.** That is why when you are a person reacting to someone in crisis just as an individual or in the helping professions you must do all you can to help preserve someone’s dignity until such time that they can do for themselves.” (Alemayehu, 2021)

<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>





“What they can do is they can be  
considerate in their words and  
actions.”

[Rayaan]

# ‘in words and action’: kindness and respect matter

---

- where possible allow the young person to choose the location for meetings
- always explain the purpose of the meeting/ interview, the possible outcomes and limitations
- look for ‘conversational entry points’ (Lee, 2018)
- be prepared to do things differently, for example walk-along meetings/interviews (Muir, 2017), activities which facilitate easy non-threatening conversation e.g. playing cards, jenga
- listen and learn from the young person
- establish trust through regular contact: brief ‘check in’ phone calls and texts.
- ‘moment by moment practice’ (Lee, 2012)

INJUSTICE ANYWHERE IS A THREAT TO JUSTICE EVERYWHERE. WE ARE  
CAUGHT IN AN INESCAPABLE NETWORK OF MUTUALITY, TIED IN  
A SINGLE GARMENT OF DESTINY. WHATEVER AFFECTS  
ONE DIRECTLY, AFFECTS ALL INDIRECTLY.

ALABAMA, 1963

relationship is central  
respect, kindness, justice  
solidarity

- overcoming  
barriers



# references

---

Alemayehu, M (2021) *Dignity*. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:6844046516701732864/> (Accessed: 14 October 2021)

Back, L. (2007) *The Art of Listening*. Reprint. London. Bloomsbury Academic. 2013.

Blackwell, D. (1997) 'Holding, containing and bearing witness: the problem of helpfulness in encounters with torture survivors', *Journal of Social Work Practice*. 11:2, pp. 81–89.

Bloch, A., & McKay, S. (2015). *Sanctioning employers does not prevent exploitation and unfree labour*. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/alice-bloch-sonia-mckay/sanctioning-employers-does-not-prevent-exploitation-and-unfree> (Accessed: 24 January 2021)

Bloch, A. and McKay, S. (2017) *Living on the Margins: Undocumented migrants in a global city*. Bristol: Policy Press

Kohli, R.K.S. (2007) *Social Work with Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children*. Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan

# references

---

Lee, P. L. (2012) Making now precious: working with survivors of torture and asylum seekers. *The international journal of narrative therapy and community work* no 5. [www.dulwichcentre.com.au](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au)

Lee, P. L. (2018) Narrative Practice and Sandplay: Practice-based Stories of Collaboration with People Seeking Asylum in Mandatory Detention. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, (37: 2), pp. 1–16

Muir, J. (2017) *Mapping Meaning into the Everyday: Experiences of an Urban Walk and Talk Group*. Professional Doctorate thesis. University of East London. Available at: [https://repository.uel.ac.uk/download/7b4e307e5ec4892de35bd5c78e65c29f742267476b0d1d3466132374ac0c1a62/2041299/Jessica%20Muir\\_Thesis\\_July%202017.pdf](https://repository.uel.ac.uk/download/7b4e307e5ec4892de35bd5c78e65c29f742267476b0d1d3466132374ac0c1a62/2041299/Jessica%20Muir_Thesis_July%202017.pdf) (Accessed: 13 October 2021)

Sigona, N. & Hughes, V. (2010) *Being children and undocumented in the UK: A background paper*. ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society. Working Paper No . 78 , University of Oxford. Available at: [https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2010/wp-2010-078-sigona-hughes\\_undocumented\\_migrant\\_children](https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2010/wp-2010-078-sigona-hughes_undocumented_migrant_children) (Accessed: 8 April 2021)

Sigona, N. & Hughes, V. (2012) *No Way Out, No Way In: Irregular migrant children and families in the UK*. ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford. Available at: [https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2012/pr-2012-undocumented\\_migrant\\_children/](https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2012/pr-2012-undocumented_migrant_children/) (Accessed: 7 April 2021)

White, J. (2004) 'Knowing, Doing and Being in Context: A Praxis-oriented Approach to Child and Youth Care.' *Child Youth Care Forum* 36 pp.225–244 DOI:10.1007/s10566-007-9043-1

Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G., Cassidy, K. (2019) *Bordering* Cambridge: Polity Press