

CIRCY

Centre for Innovation and Research
in Childhood and Youth

Annual Report 2024/25

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About CIRCY

The Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY) is a pan-university Centre of Excellence at the University of Sussex, with a membership that spans social sciences, arts, humanities, psychology, and professional fields including social work, law, education and health. CIRCY's research is innovative, interdisciplinary and international in scope, and aims to reflect and address real world concerns whilst developing new academic understandings. Our diverse research and scholarship are united by a critical engagement with children and young people's lives in time and place, and a focus on the rights, voice and welfare of the child or young person at the centre of inquiry. Considered together, the critical and multidisciplinary perspectives offered by CIRCY projects and outputs enrich understandings of childhood and youth within the fields of research, policy and practice.

Over this academic year, 2024-2025, the Centre has continued to grow, increasing our membership across disciplines, establishing new projects, and building academic and public engagement locally, nationally and internationally. We made the decision to move back to primarily in-person events this year, whilst still offering hybrid options where it felt appropriate. The support of research bidding and academic writing has continued apace, and we have continued to be successful in grant capture, publications, knowledge exchange and the delivery of projects, some of which we spotlight in this report.

CIRCY was awarded Centre of Excellence status by the University of Sussex in 2023. The Centres of Excellence represent the University's 'pillars of strength', which are progressing highly innovative and potentially transformative research. Over this academic year we continued to develop our Centre of Excellence plans, including introducing twice-termly members meetings for sharing work-in-progress, and the start of a three year CIRCY PhD scholarship (awarded to Kirsty Fraser) which seeks to develop a CIRCY youth advisory network. You can read more about some of these initiatives later in the report. The University has launched several videos highlighting the twelve new Centres of Excellence, and the video featuring CIRCY can be found [here](#).

We're also pleased to share that our flagship BA Childhood and Youth: Theory and Practice retains its rank as one of the top three courses in the UK for Childhood and Youth Studies in the Complete University Guide 2026. Our undergraduate and postgraduate students play an important role in the research centre, and their work is featured in the student voice section of this report.

Our Research and Knowledge Exchange

Our annual reports do not seek to document the whole of CIRCY's work, but rather to highlight examples that help to convey the richness and variety of the activities we engage in while seeking to understand - and make a difference to - the lives of children, young people and families. A central feature are our 'Spotlights' - narrative discussions of some of our activities, including research projects, knowledge exchange activities, and doctoral research. These spotlights reflect the diversity of the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work within CIRCY that broadly follows under the below themes.

- ➔ **Children's Participation**
- ➔ **Digital Childhoods**
- ➔ **Emotional Lives**
- ➔ **Good Childhoods and (Extra)ordinary Childhoods**
- ➔ **Methodological Innovation**

You can learn more about CIRCY's research studies and research themes on our [website](#). These themes were established to inform and inspire our work and build synergies, not to categorise or set boundaries between studies or thematic areas. We conceive of our themes as underpinning concerns that intersect to inform the conceptualisation of childhood and youth across space and time, and to enhance the wellbeing and participation of children and young people in family, social and public lives.

CIRCY Leadership



Liam Berriman



Perpetua Kirby



Simon Flacks

CIRCY has been led this year by Centre Director **Dr Liam Berriman (Childhood and Youth)**, with **Dr Perpetua Kirby (Education)** and **Dr Simon Flacks (Law)** as Deputy Centre Directors. We have also been greatly supported by **Kirsty Fraser**, as CIRCY's new postgraduate research assistant, and **Eve Wilcox** as Senior Research Centre Co-ordinator.

We are lucky to have the advice and guidance of two important sources of support. Firstly, our **Steering Group** from across the University: **Robin Banerjee** and **Kathryn Lester (Psychology)**; **Janet Boddy** and **Rebecca Webb (Education)**; **Michelle Lefevre (Social Work)**; **Dorte Thoreson (Institute of Development Studies)**; **Hannah Field (English)**; **Jo Moran-Ellis (Sociology)**; and **Kirsty Patrick (Mass Observation Archive)**. The Steering Group meets termly to guide CIRCY's work intellectually and practically. Members also contribute regularly to CIRCY activities. If you are interested in joining the steering group, please do get in touch with Liam Berriman (L.Berriman@sussex.ac.uk) for an informal conversation.

Secondly, CIRCY has an **International Advisory Committee** – academic and professional stakeholders with particular knowledges and expertise in the field of childhood and youth. This group meets annually to reflect on CIRCY's activities and outputs and consider how to develop our public engagement and reach.

Current members include:

Susannah Bowyer (Research and Development Manager, Research in Practice)

Sara Bragg (Centre for Sociology of Education and Equity, UCL Institute of Education)

Ros Edwards (Professor of Sociology, University of Southampton)

Ann Phoenix (Professor of Psychosocial Studies, UCL Institute of Education)

Heinz Sunker (Professor of Social Pedagogy, Begische Universitat, Wuppertal, Germany)

Saul Becker (Emeritus Professor from Sussex now joining Manchester Metropolitan University)

Louise Sims (Professional officer at BASW, the British Association of Social Workers)

Professor Helen Stalford (Director European Children's Rights Unit, School of Law & Social Justice, University of Liverpool)

Julia Brannen (Professor of sociology, UCL Institute for Education and Visiting Professor at CIRCY)

Helen Beckett (Director, Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire)

Elsie Whittington (Youth Co-Creation Lead for the BeeWell project, Manchester)

Anna Glinski (Deputy Director (Knowledge and Practice Development), Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse)

CIRCY Year in Review

It has been an eventful and research filled year for CIRCY, with lots of exciting new activities and initiatives.

This year we introduced twice termly CIRCY members meetings to bring childhood and youth colleagues together for regular discussions of each other's work. These hybrid meetings are designed to connect researchers from across the university and to enable the sharing of new ideas and work-in-progress in a supportive and collaborative environment. They also aim to provide opportunities for new collaborations and research synergies to emerge, and for collective sharing of learning and insight around research and funding opportunities. We're very grateful to the colleagues who have volunteered to share their work in this first year, including Lisa Holmes, Nicola Yuill, Ali Lacey, May Nasrawy, Rachel Larkin, Charlie Rumsby and Dorte Thorsen. We warmly invite colleagues to consider sharing their work at a meeting in the next academic year.

After several years of planning and writing, we are also delighted to announce that a special issue co-edited and written by CIRCY members has been published in the Health Education Journal. Led by Liam Berriman, Charlie Rumsby and Janet Boddy, the special issue - titled 'Children and young people at the centre: Concepts, ethics and methods for research' - brings together a wide range of work from within CIRCY to set out what 'centring' children and young people means in our work. You can read more about the special issue on p.22.

During the Autumn term, CIRCY hosted several talks and events. We started the year with the launch of Dominic Dean's new book *Killing Children in British Fiction: Thatcherism to Brexit*. Dominic presented an overview of the book's themes and Pam Thurschwell and Janet Boddy acted as respondents. We then welcomed Luiza Vafina from the Institute of Education as a visiting researcher, who presented her work on sibling relationships to CIRCY member. This included

a PGR workshop on 'Children's Sibling Relationships and Methodological Reflexivity' led by Luiza. Our final Autumn term event involved a conversation between Ben Highmore and Hester Barron on the theme of 'Schools, Playgrounds, Communities: The Cultural Infrastructures of Childhood'. The event also marked the launch of Ben's new book *Playgrounds: The Experimental Years*.

We kicked off our Spring term events with an exciting collaboration between CIRCY, SSRP (the Sussex Sustainability Research Programme) and the Widening Participation team. Organised by Perpetua Kirby, the event - titled *Exploring environmental sustainability: what issues matter to the lives of children and young people?* - brought together researchers, sixth form students and teachers for vibrant discussion on young people's views on sustainability against a backdrop of climate crisis. This was followed by a seminar by Dr Sally Atkinson-Sheppard from the University of Westminster on 'Perspectives on young people's involvement in organised crime', which included responses from CIRCY members Kristi Langhoff and Michelle Lefevre. The Spring term concluded with our student-organised Annual Symposium, which this year was on theme of 'Post-humanist perspectives within forest school education'. BA Childhood and Youth year 2 students Holly Barnett, Josie Drapkin, Millie Read, Lily Costello and Jazz Karki organised the event, which included presentations from invited speakers Dr Mel McCree (Bath Spa University) and Dr Joanna Hume (Northumbria University). You can read more about the event on p.14.

In the summer term, CIRCY took part in the University's Summer of Research festival through a co-hosted panel event with the Sussex Digital Humanities Lab on the question: "Are smartphone and social media bans the best way to support children growing up in a digital world?". Chaired by Sharon Webb (SHL), the panel included: Nicola Yuill (psychology), Suraj Lakhani (sociology), Gemma Cobb (media) and Liam Berriman (social work). Our final seminar of the year was led by visiting researcher Dr Signe Ravn from the University of Melbourne. Signe presented work from her forthcoming book, which focuses on time and affect in young women's lives using qualitative longitudinal methods.

Next year's schedule of events looks to be equally exciting, and we hope to see you there. Look out for Autumn newsletter at the end of September!

Research Highlights

Impact Activities

Michelle Lefevre joins working group of Who Is Losing Learning? Coalition

In March, Michelle Lefevre was asked to join a working group of the 'Who is Losing Learning? Coalition', where she shared key findings and discussed the implications of her research. The Coalition was founded to address the scale of children losing learning in England and the injustice of its disproportionate impact on the most disadvantaged or marginalised children. Michelle's evidence and critical feedback was acknowledged in the subsequent policy briefing report produced by the Institute for Public Policy Research, entitled, 'Who Is Losing Learning? Finding Solutions To The School Engagement Crisis' (<https://www.ippr.org/articles/who-is-losing-learning-solutions>). This report sets out 10 recommendations for national government, local authorities, trusts and schools which, if delivered, would see a measurable improvement in inclusion, meaning fewer children would be losing out on learning.

Submission to the Parliamentary Education Committee's Inquiry into the state of children's social care

Michelle Lefevre made a formal written submission on behalf of the Innovate Project (www.theinnovateproject.co.uk) to the Parliamentary Education Committee's Inquiry into the state of children's social care in England. This Inquiry began in December 2023 and is focusing on ways to improve early intervention, tackle rising demand and rising local authority spending, and support children with complex needs. The inquiry is also looking into protection for vulnerable children and support for care leavers, and aims to assess the social care market in the context of the private and public sector. Michelle's submission was published 12 February 2025 (<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/136207/pdf/>)

Webinar on new directions in youth safeguarding

A public engagement webinar arguing for a new direction in youth safeguarding was held in March by Michelle Lefevre and Kristine Langhoff (Social Work & Social Care) and their collaborative partner from the four-year ESRC-funded Innovate Project (www.theinnovateproject.co.uk), Carlene Firmin at Durham University. The trio presented key findings from their recent paper (<https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/3/1296/7933287>) which detailed how professionals continue to struggle to meet young people's welfare needs, provide safety and respect their rights because macro-level safeguarding systems undermine good practice. The participant group of more than 100 safeguarding leaders engaged in a vibrant discussion of how their organisations might not only seek to improve practice at a local level but how national policy and guidance might itself be challenged and transformed.

New report for Government on ethical and effective use of children's information in children's social care

The Children's Information Project (CIP) launched a new report for government in June 2026. The report "Seen, Heard and Understood: Unlocking the Potential of Children's Information Systems to Improve Outcomes" applies the project's framework for ethical and effective information use to three significant government initiatives on children's information use: the school readiness indicator, single unique identifier, and children's social care dashboard. The findings reveal several opportunities for enhancing the effectiveness of the initiatives, while also identifying potential compromises that could hinder their success.

Events & Conferences

Care, Work, and the Everyday University - A Conversation Café

Fourteen colleagues from across the social sciences took part in a Conversation Café to reflect on how caring responsibilities shape academic life at Sussex. Initiated by Drs. Judith Townend, Hannah Mason-Bish, Jenny Hewitt, and Sarah Jane Phelan, with support from the Parent & Carer Network, the event created space to explore the emotional, gendered, and often invisible work of care. Themes included the illusion of flexibility, constrained agency, and the limits of relying on favours in place of policy. A follow-up survey will soon invite broader input.

International Child and Family Conference 2025

The University of Bristol hosted the inaugural International Child and Family Conference in June this year, and a number of CIRCY members presented their work, including Rachel Thomson, Janet Boddy and Jonathan Woolgar.

4th Journal of Youth Studies Conference

The long-awaited fourth Journal of Youth Studies Conference was hosted by Ulster University in September 2024 on the theme of 'Stop the Clock'. CIRCY members presenting at the conference included Kristi Langhoff, Rachel Thomson and Liam Berriman.

Event on new youth work apprenticeships

In July, colleagues from Education & Social Work were involved in organising an online roundtable event to bring together youth work leaders and Sussex academics to discuss plans for a new youth work apprenticeship at the University. The event provided an opportunity for youth work leaders to feed into the plans for the apprenticeship, which the University hopes to launch in the near future.

Post-Rave Britain meets Antiques Roadshow:

Ben Burbridge, Chris Warne and Lucy Robinson were joined by Chris Hartnoll from Orbital at the Green Door Store to host a Brighton Festival event as part of Sussex's Festival of Ideas. We worked with the Museum of Childhood and Youth Culture and students from the third year History module 'Post-Rave Britain'. The students designed and captured stories, images of objects and meta data of rave related objects for our new project Post-Rave Archives - What would an archive look like if we did it like a rave?



Dorte Thorsen gives keynote address at Childhood Mobilities and Migration conference

In November 2024, Dr Dorte Thorsen was invited to give a keynote talk at the "Childhood mobilities and migration: Transitions to adulthood in South-South migration contexts" conference in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso). Her talk - 'Mobilities in adolescence: Socio-spatial topographies of growing up in West Africa' - offered an overview of how research on adolescent mobilities has changed from early research on 'independent child migrants' that critiqued the trafficking discourses surrounding child and adolescent mobilities in 2004 to opening a much more diverse research field today looking at social navigation, opportunity landscapes, gender and class-based inequalities in mobilities.



Image left: 'Post-Rave Britain event at Green Door Store - a Brighton Festival event as part of Sussex's Festival of Ideas.

Prizes & Awards

New archives network established

Rachel Thomson (ESW) and Kirsty Patrick (Mass Observation) were successful in bidding to the Faculty of Social Science Research Cultures fund for resources to support a new University wide network called 'Making and using social archives in an era of open data'. The first meeting of the network took place on May 7th and the group took part in a collaborative event on 30th June at the University of Leicester, supported by the British Sociological Association, called 'Beyond the Archival Turn: Making and Using Sociological Archives'. This latter event builds on 'The Archives of Youth Studies' panel organised for the Stop the Clock: 4th Journal of Youth Studies Conference, Belfast 3-5 September 2024.

The network will share resources and opportunities as well as contributing to new methodological training in archive and data driven based methods. Rachel has also been appointed as member of ESRC Expert Advisory Group for data infrastructure, skills and methods and an ESRC Data Driven Research Expert Task and Finish Group.

Lisa Holmes invited to Buckingham Palace event

Lisa Holmes attended a Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace on 14 May, hosted by King Charles III to celebrate those working in Education and Skills. Lisa was nominated for her invitation by the Department of Education for the impact of her research on children's social care and improving outcomes for children and families.



Image below: Lisa Holmes at Buckingham Palace.
Credit: Lisa Holmes

People News

Bon voyage (but not goodbye) to Rebecca Webb!

This summer, Rebecca Webb, a former co-Director of CIRCY and long-term steering group member will be leaving the University of Sussex. Rebecca has had a profound impact on CIRCY during her time at Sussex, particularly through her provocative and stimulating theory and method workshops. We will hugely miss Rebecca's warmth, energy, creativity and wisdom on the CIRCY team, and I'm sure you will all join us in thanking her for the care and work she has put into making CIRCY what it is.

Charles University visitors

In May, colleagues from CIRCY were involved in hosting a group of visitors from Charles University. Janet Boddy, Perpetua Kirby and Liam Berriman took part in an exchange of ideas about childhood and youth focused teaching and research in both universities. Perpetua also had the opportunity to dust off her Czech!

Luiza Vafina

During the autumn term, CIRCY hosted Luiza Vafina, a researcher in the Institute of Education at the University of Zurich. Luiza is a team member of 'WoKidS', the Children's well-being in German-speaking Switzerland research project. As part of the study, Luiza has been conducting a doctoral research project on sibling relationships and subjective wellbeing, which she shared with CIRCY colleagues during a PGR workshop. Luiza also shared her work with our BA Childhood and Youth students on their 'Parents and Families' module. We wish Luiza all the best with the write-up of her fascinating study.

Madoka Ishioka

During the spring term, a postgraduate researcher Madoka Ishioka from Osaka University visited CIRCY for a day to learn more about the Centre's work and childhood studies in the UK. Madoka took part in conversations with colleagues about her research on how children and young people experience place-making initiatives led by civil society organizations and how these initiatives relate to cooperation between the public and private sectors.

Caitlin Shaughnessy joins the Nuffield Justice Observatory

Congratulations to Caitlin Shaughnessy, a research fellow on the Children's Information project, who has been appointed to a new role in the Nuffield Justice Observatory. Caitlin has been involved as a researcher on the Children's Information project for the last three years and will be greatly missed by the project team. Good luck Caitlin!

Signe Ravn

During the summer term we welcome Signe Ravn, an Associate Professor in Sociology from the University of Melbourne for a two week visit to Sussex. Signe has strong historical links to CIRCY, including work with Prof Rachel Thomson on narrative methods. During her visit Signe presented work from her upcoming book, from an ARC-Linkage project on 'Women managing on the margins'. We look forward to reading Signe's book when it is published!

Publication News

The CIRCY special issue is hot off the press!

Over the last two years, CIRCY colleagues have been working on a special issue in the Health Education Journal on the theme of 'Children and young people at the centre: Concepts, ethics and methods for research'. In June the special issue was finally published and includes twelve articles authored by over twenty CIRCY members and collaborators. You access most of the articles open access via this link: <https://journals-sagepub-com.sussex.idm.oclc.org/toc/heja/84/4> A more in-depth profile of the special issue can be found on p.22.

Editors choice in the British Journal of Social Work

Congratulations to Professors Michelle Lefevre, Kristine Langhoff & Gillian Ruch who, along with Professor Carlene Firmin from Durham University, had their co-authored paper 'A line in the sand: Moving from surface improvement to foundational shifts to develop effective responses to extra-familial risks and harms' selected from thirty to be 'Editor's Choice' in the May edition of the British Journal of Social Work.

Update on Creating with Uncertainty

Dr Perpetua Kirby (CIRCY Deputy Director) and Dr Rebecca Webb's (Associate Professor in Early Years & Primary Education) free digital sustainability resource for educators, "Creating With Uncertainty: Sustainability education resources for a changing world", has been re-released with five new chapters. 'Menstrual Health', 'Nature Conservation', 'The Commons', 'Gifting' and 'Creating a Global Agreement' will provide fresh perspectives on sustainability, from the interconnectedness of human and planetary health to collaborative efforts for environmental justice. The revised resource continues the pair's work of offering accessible, high-quality materials for educators to guide students through complex, ethical questions about how we live on our planet.

Research News

New Individual Development Award

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Devyn Glass, has been awarded an Individual Development Award from the Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey, and Sussex to explore the use of Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) in parent/carer-child pairs with different neurotypes (autistic parents/non-autistic children, non-autistic parents/autistic children). Using observational coding and Motion Energy Analysis, the research examines whether VIG enhances attunement and movement synchrony in mixed-neurotype pairs, and whether VIG can increase the parent/carer's understanding of their child. The study will also assess the feasibility of using routine VIG video recordings for structured behavioural analysis, offering a valuable tool for research and clinical practice. The findings aim to enhance understanding of communication patterns in neurodivergent family contexts, with potential for broader applications in child and adolescent mental health.

Reanimating data project

During the year the Reanimating Data Project team (led by Rachel Thomson) have been finalising outputs and training linked to the project. These have included:

- A keynote address (5th June) to 'Thinking Qualitatively', the annual conference of the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology at University of Alberta. Rachel presented on 'Juxtaposing (heterosexualities) 1990/2020: time binds, rematriation and the neglected things of feminist research'. The event had over 100 participants online.
- A key address (14th June) to NYRIS 2024 'Youth in a Just Fair and World' conference at University of Tampere, Finland. 'Dance this mess around: celebrating youth at the impasse'. At NYRIS 2024 Youth in a Just Fair and World, University of Tampere, Finland.

- A conference paper with Prof Sue Scott on 'Reimagining feminist futures: working with the archive to forge intergenerational knowledge', presented at the European Sociological Association conference in Porto (27-30th August 2024).
- An NCRM workshop on 'Reanimating data: secondary analysis, historical enquiry, & participatory data collection.'
- A Sussex Digital Humanities Lab 10 year anniversary lecture (17th March) on 'Reanimating Data: Working with archives.'
- A workshop titled 'Reanimating Data: a new approach to qualitative enquiry' delivered at the Rockwool Foundation, Copenhagen (24th April 2025)

New projects

Prof Kristi Langhoff, Professor of Social Work, has been awarded £25k by Oasis to lead an evaluation project and £23.6k of AHRC funding for the project 'Re-imagining Resistance: Evidencing the impact of creative participatory research with young people affected by sexual violence.'

Dr Tam Cane, Associate Professor of Social Work, has been awarded funding by Barnardos for a new project titled 'Designing 'safe spaces' for Black children and young people in care placements with emphasis on identity and voice.'

Funding for new Girlhood in Migration Research Network

Dr Rachel Larkin, Assistant Professor in Social Work, has been awarded an ISRF Grant to develop the Girlhood in Migration Research Network, co-founded in 2024 with Dr Tatiana Avignone at the University Loyola in Seville. The inter-disciplinary network brings together scholars researching how girlhood affects children and young people's experiences of migration and how states respond to them. The ISRF grant will fund a two-day workshop at the University of Sussex in September 2025 for nine European scholars. The aims are to deepen our understanding of key issues for migrant girls and establish a future international research direction to improve responses to girls in forced migration.

Dorte Thorsen awarded Open Research Area funding for project on vocational training and informal learning in West Africa

The research project "Pathways for Vocational Training and Informal Learning in West Africa" has been awarded a total of £1.1 million in the 8th round of Open Research Area funding. Researchers from six universities in Benin, Canada, Côte d'Ivoire, Germany, Ghana, and the United Kingdom will explore how different forms of TVET are part of a complex, multifaceted landscape in West Africa that young women and men navigate to pursue expected and hoped-for pathways. Focusing on the value ascribed to apprenticeships under master crafts persons and new avenues for training in smaller urban areas the studies will put young people at the centre of the inquiry, without losing sight of the importance of the social fabric of their societies. Ethnographic and participatory methodologies will guide the research and include participation from young people to develop the questions to be asked.

Spencer Foundation award for project on privatisation of technical and vocational schools in Côte d'Ivoire

The research project "TVET pathways in Côte d'Ivoire" has been awarded a grant of close to £277,000 from the Spencer foundation. A team of British and Ivorian researchers, including Dr Dorte Thorsen, will collaborate to explore how the hyper-privatisation of technical and vocational schools in Côte d'Ivoire shapes young people's engagement in technical and vocational education and training.



CIRCY's involvement in teaching and learning

CIRCY continues in its mission to provide a supportive and creative 'space to think with' for the academic community - building methodological capacity, opening up new interdisciplinary possibilities, and supporting the work of colleagues at all career stages. Our courses have an active social media presence, on BlueSky, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. Postgraduate researchers continue to register for our Childhood and Youth PhD and you will see spotlight contributions from current and recent doctoral researchers later in this report. Our taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses continue to flourish, and we are delighted to see our graduates thriving across a range of academic and professional roles with children, young people and families

BA in Childhood and Youth Studies

We are delighted that this year our undergraduate degree in Childhood and Youth Studies retains its position as one of the top three undergraduate courses for childhood and youth in the UK. We have some news on our students. Georgie Sanville was this year's winner of the BA Childhood & Youth dissertation award for outstanding research. We spotlight below the findings of Georgie's dissertation project. We also feature the reflections of our year 2 BACY students who collaboratively organised the CIRCY symposium this year on the theme of post-humanist perspectives on forest schools.

BACY Dissertation prize winner 2024-5

The Impact of Under-Recognised and Undiagnosed ADHD in Women and Girls

Georgie Sanville

Existing research has shown that females are consistently undiagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) compared to males (McDonnell, 2022), however there is little research into the impact of this underdiagnosis. Many women with undiagnosed ADHD often report spending their lives feeling "different", blaming themselves for their struggles and underachievement (Lynn, 2019; Attoe and Climie, 2023). This dissertation aimed to explore the lived experiences of women who have grown up with undiagnosed ADHD and the impact this has had on their self-perception, identity, emotional well-being and social relationships. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted and later thematically analysed. Three themes emerged from the data: 'Living undiagnosed', 'Emotional toll of ADHD' and 'Diagnosis as a turning point', highlighting the need for better ADHD recognition in girls. Overall, this study further highlighted the need for better understandings of ADHD in females, earlier detection and diagnosis, and better support systems.

MA in Childhood and Youth Studies

We are incredibly proud of the research produced by our MA Childhood and Youth Studies students as part of their dissertations. Recent projects have included a study of the academic journeys of young middle-class women in Pakistan, and gender performance in the UK's army cadet force.

In what follows, we provide a flavour of some of our students' research, by shining a spotlight on the most recent prize-winning dissertations.

The Barrie Thorne Prize for Best Overall Academic Achievement

The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children's Mental Health: A Comparative Study of Nigeria and England.

Nwakmaka Sandra Ikegbula

The education system in the UK is different from what I was used to in Nigeria. Essay writing, in particular, terrified me. I struggled with confidence and was going through personal issues that made it hard to concentrate. I remember sitting in my first academic advising session, which was one of my coursework, not knowing what to say or how to begin.

Luckily, my department created a space where students could talk about academic and personal challenges. My course advisor listened patiently as I expressed my fears and encouraged me to overcome them. Sussex became more than just a place of learning. It became a place where I rebuilt my confidence.

My dissertation was centered on the impact of domestic violence on children's mental health, comparing the lived experiences of children in Nigeria and England. My background in child protection in Nigeria, combined with my practice experience at the Hangleton and Knoll Project in Brighton, inspired my commitment to my dissertation. I witnessed young

people navigating trauma, not just from direct abuse but also from witnessing violence at home, and understanding how systems can either help or harm their recovery

I adopted a desk-based methodology, drawing from 41 studies and major reports by UNICEF, WHO, NSPCC, and other organisations published between 2015 and 2024. I examined the prevalence of domestic violence, the specific mental health outcomes for children in both countries, and how legal and policy responses differ. Findings revealed that in Nigeria, neglect remains the most prevalent form of domestic violence, while emotional abuse is more common in England. Regardless of geography, children affected by domestic violence face long-term mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and cognitive or learning difficulties. The trauma is compounded when protective systems fail them.

A critical takeaway from my dissertation is that Nigeria's fragmented legal frameworks often lack enforcement, leaving many children vulnerable despite national policies. In contrast, children in England benefit from more robust child protection systems and clearer legal definitions of domestic abuse, particularly with the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

My MA Childhood and Youth Studies at the University of Sussex gave me the academic tools needed to carry out my research. Modules like Contemporary Issues in Childhood and Youth and Theorising Childhood helped me think critically about global child welfare, vulnerability, and resilience. Engaging with texts, such as Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity," encouraged me to reflect on how children's lives are shaped by unstable social systems, especially under austerity politics. My time at the University of Sussex was transformative. Beyond the academic growth, I was surrounded by lecturers, peers, and mentors who challenged and inspired me. I leave with not only a stronger voice but also a deeper commitment to advocating for children who live in silence and deserve to be heard.

Through my dissertation and experience, I concluded that children exposed to domestic violence are not just passive victims; they are survivors with complex needs and untapped resilience. But to help them thrive, systems must listen, protect, and respond more effectively. I hope my work contributes to improving child protection responses, particularly in under-resourced settings like Nigeria.

The Cathy Urwin Prize Winner for Work with the Greatest Impact on Practice

Teachers Approaches to Educating Children with Sensory Processing Challenges

Anna Hadar

Sensory processing challenges in preschool-aged children have become an increasingly important topic in the field of early childhood education. Research has grown around how sensory processing affects children's behavior, learning, and overall school experience. However, sensory processing challenges have not yet been recognized as a medically diagnosable disorder. This gap in formal recognition sparked my interest in exploring how we approach these challenges in young children. I wanted to explore how the absence of a purely medical framework might create an opportunity to develop a more holistic and inclusive model of education—one that embraces the diversity of children's cognitive, sensory and social development without reducing them to clinical labels.

My research examined preschool teachers' perspectives on supporting children with sensory processing challenges, focusing on the barriers and opportunities within current teaching practices. I explored how teachers conceptualize and imagine these children and the tensions they face between the expectations of mainstream educational goals—such as early literacy and numeracy—and the need to respond to the unique needs and interests of each child.

The courses I took through MACYs provided me with a theoretical foundation to critique conventional educational practices and normative ideas of childhood development. This degree also deepened my understanding of how schools can perpetuate hierarchies between children labeled as able-bodied or disabled, and how centering notions of 'typical' development can marginalize those who do not fit this narrow framework.

This research involved semi-structured interviews with preschool teachers at a school where I had previously worked, positioning me as an insider researcher. This insider role required continuous reflexivity throughout the research process and allowed me to gain a rich, nuanced understanding of the teachers' perspectives, which I believe greatly enhanced the depth of the study.

The teachers interviewed expressed that sensory processing concerns are central to their practice as early childhood educators, shaping both their daily interactions with children and their longterm educational strategies. Teachers described how helping children develop sensory modulation skills—such as regulating their responses to sensory stimuli, and learning

self-regulation techniques—creates a crucial foundation for success in the classroom and beyond. In this view, sensory modulation concerns do not compete with academic priorities, but rather support them by enabling children to engage and participate meaningfully in school.

The findings of this study underscored the importance of a collaborative support network for children facing sensory processing challenges. Teachers emphasized the value of close partnerships with occupational therapists, inclusion aides, parents and other professionals, working together to meet children's needs in a way that respects their individual sensory processing experiences. This network of support ensures that children's unique developmental trajectories are nurtured, while also preserving the role of the preschool teacher as a relational figure who supports the whole child, without being pressured to conform to a narrow, medicalized view of what is "normal" behavior. This model resists pathologizing sensory processing differences and instead honors them as natural variations in the ways children experience and interact with the world.

The MACY program has profoundly shaped my approach as both a researcher and as a future early childhood practitioner. The critical lens I developed has enabled me to reflect more deeply on how early childhood institutions interact with issues of ability, development, and inclusion. As a result, I have gained essential tools to engage with children in more thoughtful and responsive ways, ensuring that children's diverse needs and experiences are valued and supported. I am grateful for all of my professors as well as the support of my dissertation advisor Rachel Thomson for helping me explore and deepen my interests in early childhood.

Our prize winning Masters dissertations, including for previous years, can be read in full in the CIRCY journal on our blog:
circyatsussex.wordpress.com

CIRCY Annual Symposium

Reimagining Education Through Nature: Exploring Humanism and Posthumanism in Forest School Practices

Jodie Collyer, Millie Read, Holly Barnett, Jazz Karki, Lily Costello. (Year 2, BA Childhood and Youth: Theory and Practice)

Our CIRCY seminar, held on 26th March 2025, explored the evolving role of Forest School education through the lenses of humanism and posthumanism. We were inspired to explore this theme due to its strong connections to our coursework in social pedagogy, inclusive education, and health and well-being, as well as some of our group's participation in the University of Sussex's Forest Food Garden elective. The theme encouraged us to consider not just the educational benefits of outdoor learning, but also how nature-based pedagogies can shape more inclusive, relational, and sustainable ways of working with children.

We were honoured to welcome two key speakers: Mel McCree and Dr Joanna Hulme. Mel McCree presented her research, *Hare and the Tortoise* (2018), a three-year longitudinal study which tracked the impact of Forest School practices on the academic achievement and emotional well-being of disadvantaged children. Her work illuminated how regular, child-led sessions in nature—with strong school support—can transform not only individual learning outcomes, but also broader school cultures. Her emphasis on nature connection and emotional regulation resonated deeply with our discussions around social pedagogy and the importance of creating nurturing, relational spaces for learning.

Dr Joanna Hulme followed with a compelling presentation of her paper, *Meeting in the Forest: Education in a Posthuman Era* (2022). Her work challenged us to reframe our understandings of education, shifting from human-centred approaches toward a more entangled perspective that recognises our co-existence with non-human entities. This provoked rich discussion on what it means to be a learner and an educator in times of ecological crisis and social complexity. Her insights offered us new language and frameworks for thinking about inclusion, agency, and relationality within outdoor and forest-based education.

We wanted the structure of the seminar itself to reflect some of the principles we were learning about. Inspired by the participatory and sensory aspects of Forest School, we incorporated natural materials such as charcoal and a reflective space for drawing, inspired by the sounds of nature that we played into the room, to foster open discussion and alternative modes of engagement. The drawings created by participants were beautiful and reflective.

The process of developing this seminar challenged and enriched our understanding of education. From curating the topic and engaging with academic research to communicating with leading professionals and facilitating the event, we gained invaluable experience in academic collaboration, event planning, and critical thinking. More importantly, we were reminded of the deep value of curiosity, creativity, and connection—principles we now see as fundamental to both learning and teaching.

This experience has further ignited our passion for inclusive and holistic approaches to education, and we look forward to carrying these insights forward in our academic journey and future work with children and young people.

Text and image by: Jodie Collyer

Photo Exhibition

Disrupting normative constructions of nature in mainstream education

The following section of this year's report contains an exhibition of images from the ESRC funded research project: **'Growing up Green? Disrupting neoliberalist and anthropocentric constructions of nature in primary and early educational spaces'** by CIRCY postgraduate researcher, **Anna Ridgewell**.

Anna was awarded her PhD in June 2025. The project can be accessed in full at: tinyurl.run/SF0pLJ



“The natural world, absolutely changes them... I can't think of a way in which it doesn't help them to be outdoors.” – Teacher

“They really love going out there. They love it. Absolutely love it... it's good for their wellbeing.” – Early Years Practitioner

What image is brought to mind when we picture children in outdoor natural environments? What about the natural environments within spaces of primary education and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)? Do young children have the opportunity to freely engage with nature as part of their day at school or nursery, so that they can benefit personally and also grow into ecologically conscious citizens? The 'Growing up Green' project, undertaken by CIRCY doctoral researcher Anna Ridgewell, aimed to empirically investigate the everyday experiences of children and adults with nature in mainstream primary and ECEC settings in the UK. A central objective of the research was to elucidate the processes through which children's access to these spaces is facilitated or restricted, and to ascertain how both children and staff perceive and value nature within these contexts. Analysis of the discourse of eight educational practitioners from primary schools and nurseries revealed a perspective that emphasised children's inherent right to freedom and happiness when immersed in natural surroundings, as highlighted by the quotes above.



“The field is a bit more of a planned activity... we need to check it's OK and it's not too muddy, it's not too hazardous.” – Early Years Practitioner

“The garden, when things are growing, becomes a more usable teaching space.” - Teacher

“That's very much our vision, for children to be active and learning outside.” - Teacher

Regular nature engagement has been robustly linked with a variety of health and wellbeing benefits and the development of pro-environmental attitudes and UK governmental policy frequently advocates for children's connection with nature within spaces of mainstream education. However, years of austerity-driven reductions in budgets, staffing, and resources mean that realising the ambition of unstructured nature engagement might be challenging. Indeed, this research project found that children's access to natural environments within school and nursery settings is, in fact, frequently constrained. Factors such as risk aversion, stringent staff-to-child ratio requirements, prevailing weather conditions, and the perceived 'usability' of outdoor spaces collectively influence the extent to which children are permitted to engage with nature. Furthermore, predominant educational ideologies exert a direct influence on the inherent value attributed to nature by staff. In this paradigm, outdoor spaces are reconfigured into educational commodities and instrumentalised to facilitate continuous active learning. Consequently, the acquisition of science-based skills and knowledge is often prioritised over the ideal of unstructured free-play in natural settings.



“It’s my special... because... I like pictures.” – Child, 3 years old

But what value do children place on outdoor environments in their schools and nurseries? Do they adhere to these same conceptualisations? To explore this question, 26 children aged 3-6 years old from the same settings as the adult practitioners, participated in guided walks in pairs, around the outdoor spaces of their nursery or school, documenting their favourite aspects through photographic means. Subsequently, the same children engaged in reflexive discussions concerning their own photographs and their perceived significance. The project innovated a methodological framework that integrated components of the participatory Photovoice method within a Reflexive Thematic Analysis, facilitating the generation of in-depth and nuanced data from the participants. By attending to the children’s small scale and mundane practice, a rich dataset was developed from a cohort historically spoken for by adult caregivers. This approach afforded child-centredness, positioned children as active research participants, and acknowledged their epistemic authority regarding their own lived realities. The process appeared to be experienced by the children as an enjoyable, unique and important activity, enabling them to be ‘seen’.



“It’s my special... because... I like pictures.” – Child, 3 years old

“My bum can just go in the wet!” – Child, 3 years old

“We like the woods! We like the poo!” – Child, 4 years old

“I like the rain.” – Child, 4 years old

The research activities with the children suggested that the physical and imagined spatial delimitations they experience at school and nursery, while ostensibly rigid boundaries, are actually permeable and open to negotiation, as children actively exercise their agency in determining their engagement with the outdoors. Children’s complex, relational realities became readily apparent through their discourse. Mundane natural phenomena served as devices through which they articulate their lived realities, as they strayed from normative understandings of undesirable outdoor features, and reconfigured what it means to become entangled physically or discursively with the rain, wind, or dog poo. Consequently, outdoor environments were perpetually subject to ongoing interpretation and negotiation, in an intricate web of meaning-making. Through their performative and embodied interactions with everyday natural phenomena, children effectively disrupted the established boundaries they were consistently compelled to navigate. This enabled them to construct and enact an alternative world that transcended dualistic categorisations of ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe,’ but which instead fostered a dynamic and transformative spatial reality.



“That’s snow! It’s a snowflake! Oh wow.” – Child, 4 years old

“When I get all the leaves... I just spray them away!” – Child, 4 years old

“I like the plants... because they grow into something.” – Child, 5 years old

Research findings suggested that children spontaneously construct ‘common worlds’ with their environments, experiencing their surroundings as an interconnected assemblage of diverse presences. This engagement integrates them into a dynamic, relational, and collective flow, which continuously generates new ways of seeing and emergent possibilities. Unseen agents of small and mundane natural matter such as leaves, mud, sticks, or snowflakes ‘act back’ as lively and vital active agents. This transforms even nature-depleted environments into spaces rich with wonder and potential. Speculative and playful animism allows the children to conceptualise the more-than-human world as more than inert matter, elevating natural objects from a passive background to a foregrounded position of agentic potentiality. Children exhibited concern for the flourishing of all forms of life, including apparently undesirable common entities such as weeds or pigeons. This suggests a notable divergence between children’s valuations of outdoor spaces and conventional adult notions of environmental worth.

1 Taylor, A. (2017) ‘Beyond stewardship: common world pedagogies for the Anthropocene’, *Environmental Education Research*, 23(10), pp. 1448–1461. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2017.1325452>



The 'Growing up Green' project demonstrates the influence of normative ideological processes on the utilisation of outdoor spaces, underscoring how spatial, statutory, structural, and perceptual elements collectively shape outdoor access within educational and childcare settings. Despite these constraints, children show an appreciation for diverse outdoor environments, affirming the intrinsic worth of mundane, nearby nature and natural matter. The research findings suggest the necessity of embedding explicit guidance within statutory instruments to empower practitioners to facilitate children's unstructured engagement with nature, which is untethered from prescribed learning objectives. Furthermore, it advocates that available natural resources should not be avoided because of a fear of risk. Facilitating young children's interactions with extant natural materials and environments within mainstream primary education and ECEC is a crucial intervention. In an era characterised by economic precarity and impending ecological crises, such ostensibly small, incremental steps are, in fact, foundational for fostering a broader trajectory towards the cultivation of ecologically conscious future generations, ultimately benefiting both humanity and the more-than-human world.

Image credits: Ash, Cass, Nico, Paige, Anna, Bailey, Kodi, Aster, Ziggy.

With thanks to all the child and adult participants.

CIRCY Research Spotlights

CIRCY special issue on ‘Children and Young People at the Centre’

**Liam Berriman (Social Work),
Charlie Rumsby (Social Work)
& Janet Boddy (Education)**

One of the core threads running through CIRCY's work is a collective interest in designing research in ways that centres children and young people. During our tenth anniversary year (back in 2022!), we decided to pursue a special issue in the Health Education Journal that would set out some of the distinctive and innovative ways that CIRCY goes about the work of ‘centring’ children and young people in our research and thinking. Initially we were unsure whether colleagues would have the time and energy to commit to such a project, but when our call for abstracts went out, we had an overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic response from CIRCY members and collaborators. Those putting themselves forward reflected a wide breadth of CIRCY's disciplinary expertise and included colleagues from across career stages. Several of the paper's were also fortunate to have long-term CIRCY collaborators from practice, policy and in the international field of childhood studies.

As most of the authors were based at the University of Sussex, we decided that our approach to developing the special issue would follow a distinctly local, in-person and collaborative approach. We held several workshops where the authors came together to share their writing-in-progress with each other, and where we collectively discussed the emergent themes and threads of the special issue. This helped us to identify key cross-cutting threads in our collective work, including: the historical and material dimensions of research; digital, co-design and participatory approaches; and addressing systematic challenges through listening to children's voices. Consequently, the special issue reflects the collaborative efforts of all the CIRCY members involved from inception to publication.

You can read the editorial of the special issue here:
<https://journals-sagepub-com.sussex.idm.oclc.org/doi/abs/10.1177/00178969251331089>

Here we want to briefly highlight the fantastic contributions that make up the special issue:

Rachel Thomson and **Ester McGeeney's** paper documents how archives (in this case the Women's Risk and Aids Project) can become a catalyst for developing inter-generational thinking about past and present sexual health issues, such as the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. Their paper demonstrates how working with archived materials can open new opportunities for staging cross-generational conversations about young women's sexualities and sexual health.

Kathleen Bailey employs a posthumanist lens to examine how the material world can help to facilitate discussions about farming and sustainability – creating interconnections between children's lives and the material worlds of animals and global ecologies. Using artmaking and play as methods, Bailey's research underscores how societal constructions of children as vulnerable limit their ability to contribute to discussions about sustainability.

Hamide Elif Üzümcü and **Liam Berriman** focus on the ethical challenges in researching children's digital lives in Türkiye and England. Their paper examines how a digital moral landscape materialises in the homes of families and is shaping of family relationships and practices around digital media. Drawing insights from two international contexts, the paper shows how cultural politics influence the methodologies used to make children's digital lives researchable.

Devyn Glass, Sadie Gillett and **Nicola Yuill** draw on multimedia tools to develop co-constructive methods of digital storytelling with autistic children and young people in a UK secondary school to better understand their sensory and emotional regulation. The research emphasises participatory methods, highlighting the evolution of the project from a structured process to one driven by the participants' needs and self-determined goals.

Pattie Gonsalves and colleagues draw on their work in India to present 10 recommendations for co-designing youth-focused digital mental health interventions in LMICs. Their paper emphasises collaboration among youth, researchers and clinicians – addressing context-specific challenges such as inclusivity, cultural relevance and the safeguarding of young participants.

Camille Warrington, Kristine Langhoff and **Becky Warnock**'s paper reflects on a 3-year participatory photography and visual methods project working with a group of young people in England who had experienced sexual violence and exploitation – seeking to understand what 'resistance' means to them. They demonstrate how arts-based approaches can foster a safe, participatory research environment, but that such an outcome is not guaranteed.

Rachel Burr shares insights from a longitudinal study that explored the impact of preventive mental health support offered in therapeutic group settings for adolescents aged 11–16 over 4 years. Group participation led to improved emotional expression, reduced isolation and a rethinking of mental health beyond diagnostic categories. The study findings underscore the importance of participatory research in fostering social agency, empathy and redefined self-worth outcomes, which are not easily measured but are deeply impactful for young participants.

Tom Grice-Jackson and colleagues reflect on how young people and other local stakeholders can be meaningfully involved in the design of mental health services through their lived experiences of using and navigating these services. They set out how place-based health interventions can be led by local stakeholders, centring the views of young people and the health practitioners who support.

May Nasrawy's research focused on understanding what well-being means to children and young people in Jerusalem, a context affected by uncertainty, violence and the ongoing Israeli Palestinian conflict. Her work highlights the sharpened complexities of doing research with children experiencing violence, uncertainty and political conflict.

Nathalie Huegler and colleagues' explore the potential for a Transitional Safeguarding framework to better link together systems and services around a young person during this key period of early adulthoods. Their paper calls for more collaborative and connective work that places young people in a whole-system perspective.

Lisa Holmes and **Michelle Lefevre** critique the conventional focus on financial cost-effectiveness in safeguarding and welfare services for young people at risk of extra-familial harm. They argue that assessments often prioritise measurable, monetisable outcomes while overlooking subjective and moral dimensions of value. Drawing on UK-based research, the authors advocate for a more holistic approach that centres young people's perspectives and integrates 'softer outcomes', such as well-being, educational engagement and qualitative insights into what matters most to youth.

The papers in the special issue are available open access here: <https://journals-sagepub-com.sussex.idm.oclc.org/toc/heja/84/4>

With special thanks to Peter Aggleton, Fiona Thirlwell and the anonymous reviewers for helping us to realise this project.

‘Lines of Inventive Connection’ Exhibition

Fliss Bull (Education)

“The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds of response. Mixed-up times are overflowing with both pain and joy... The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning” (Haraway, 2016 pg. 1)

This exhibition took place in June 2025 at the Phoenix Art Space in Brighton.

The collection showcased a range of photography and children’s artforms gathered as part of my PhD Research Project with University of Sussex, which asks the question:

What can communities learn from children’s ideas and creative responses around the theme of nature?

The exhibition drew on the pedagogical philosophy of Reggio Emilia, aiming to act as a ‘collective meaning-making event’ (Rinaldi, 2006), with multiple opportunities for visitors to offer their own reflections via the interactive and feedback areas throughout the exhibition, adding a further layer of data to the study.

The collection included photography by local artist Ainoa Burgos, as well as original artforms including clay work, nature collage, paintings and bunting created by around 115 children aged 3-8 years from Year 2 of Goldstone Primary School and Bee in the Woods Kindergarten and Forest School, both in nearby Portslade. The displays were interspersed with fieldnotes, reflections and early findings, which were intended to offer visitors some context, as well as posing questions for reflection.

Inspired by critical posthumanism, and particularly the work of Donna Haraway (after whose words the exhibition is named) this project aims to attend care-fully to the multiple ways in which young children express their ideas and respond to nature. Children are positioned not as ‘innocent’ in terms of naivety, but capable of offering divergent perspectives and alternative literacies around nature:

“...children’s world-making, and its messy entanglements with more-than-human others, provides an ‘unlikely alliance between unruly minor players who do not conform to the rules of the main game’” (Taylor, 2013 in Blaise, Rooney & Royds 2020 pp. 112).

The collection attempted to document some of these ‘entanglements’ offering them up as opportunities to provoke community thinking, discussion and reflection around our connections to/as nature and to ask questions that help us ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016) of these uncertain times, whilst maintaining a sense of hopefulness grounded in what Hannah Arendt described as ‘love for the world’ in which we take up our collective responsibility for renewing our common world by opening educational spaces into which the young and new can emerge (ibid 2006 pg. 193).

The private view for the exhibition was well-attended by parents, carers and teachers of the children who had been involved in the project, with around 50 visitors on the night. This provided a wonderful opportunity for co-reflection as well as a chance to highlight and celebrate the depth of the children’s thinking. Bee in the Woods also held their monthly staff meeting within the exhibition space, which provided an opportunity for staff to share their responses and insights to the early findings.

The public viewings attracted fellow academics and researchers from both University of Sussex and Brighton University, as well as teachers and early years practitioners from various settings including Atelieristas from a local Reggio Emilia inspired nursery chain. These provided opportunities for reflections on pedagogy and practice, as well as around our own felt sense of connection and/or disconnection from the natural world, the role of affect and embodiment and some fascinating reflections on how place/body memories can act to animate a deep sense of connection with the more-than-human.

Fliss is working towards the write-up of her thesis and hopes to have completed this in early 2026. To connect with her around the project or possible collaborations, please contact her at fb290@sussex.ac.uk

Children and the Queer Judgments Project

Nuno Ferreira (Law)
Maria Federica Moscati (Law)
& Senthorun Raj (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Queering the law

Using a queer lens to analyse law and policy is a social justice crucial endeavour. [The Queer Judgments Project \(QJP\)](#) is contributing to this movement by re-imagining, re-writing, and re-inventing, from queer and other complementing perspectives, judgments that have considered sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC) issues. We wanted to cultivate a project that brought together friends, colleagues, and activists who were interested in improving and challenging the law and its application to make life better for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and other (LGBTIQ+) people and communities.

We are building on a tradition of initiatives that have re-written legal decisions for a fairer future, starting with the [Feminist Judgments projects](#). We also found inspiration in Alex Sharpe's important article "[Queering Judgment](#)".

The Queer Judgments book

The QJP edited collection has been [published by Counterpress](#) in January 2025. With an international reach and multi-disciplinary scope, this edited collection invites you to a queer dance through 26 judgments and commentaries.

Many of the contributions in the book relate directly or indirectly to children, and we would like to highlight those in this annual report.

The contribution by Sanna Elfving, Katie Jukes, Miriam Schwarz and Surabhi Shukla (Chapter 16) offers a creative exploration of the 2008 European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgment in [EB v France](#). The case concerned a lesbian adoption

applicant who was refused by French authorities. By deploying drama and poetry techniques, the authors explore notions of family, gender, motherhood, parenting and childhood. Although the original decision of the ECtHR was positive to the claimant and found that her right to non-discrimination in conjunction with her right to private and family life had been violated, the authors powerfully unpack the stereotypes and stigma judges still associate with queer parents.

Chapter 17 of the book –authored by Claire O’Connell and James Rooney– also relates to children by re-working the Irish Supreme Court decision in [McD v L and M](#). The case consisted in a guardianship dispute between a lesbian couple and a gay man who had acted as sperm donor in the conception of the couple’s child. The authors offer a re-imagined dissent against the Supreme Court’s original decision, by critiquing the notions of marital and de facto families, supported by a queer creation of a constitutional right to procreative liberty.

Daryl Yang authored Chapter 19, which offers a rich discussion of the 2018 Singapore High Court decision in [UKM v Attorney-General](#). The case concerned an adoption order request, in connection to a child gestated through surrogacy, with the aim of obtaining Singaporean citizenship for the child. Although the Court granted the adoption order, Daryl Yang argues in favour of a queerer, liberating approach to the case, in the form of a concurring opinion.





Lynsey Mitchell's contribution (Chapter 20) focused on the 2017 judgment of the UK Supreme Court in R (on the application of A and B) v Secretary of State for Health. The case related to the right to abortion, more specifically having access to abortion in England through the National Health Service (NHS) despite being normally resident in Northern Ireland. At the centre of the case was A, who, when aged 15, became pregnant. B - her mother - joined the court application. Lynsey Mitchell uses a queer lens to frame this case as being about reproductive rights and, more essentially, about bodily autonomy, rather than a competence devolution issue. This allows Mitchell to re-write the original judgment to find that there had been a violation of the applicants' right to non-discrimination in conjunction with the right to private and family life, as well as a violation of the prohibition on torture and inhuman or degrading treatment.

Liam Davis then offers a contribution on the 2020 UK Supreme Court judgment in McConnell and YY v The Registrar General for England and Wales (Chapter 21). The case dealt with the request of a trans man who had given birth to be named as father or parent (but not as mother) in the child's birth certificate. Despite concluding that not even a queer approach to the case could give the applicant the desired outcome, Davis offers a re-written judgment that considers queer parenthood more carefully and declares the applicable legal norms incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

Joanne Stagg follows with an analysis of the 2020 decision of

an Australian Family Court in the case Re Imogen (No. 6) (Chapter 22). The case—relating to a 16-year-old transgender girl—hinged on issues such as medical age of consent, parental authority, and witness expertise. Although the original decision was positive and allowed the girl to access medical transition, Stagg offers an anti-cisnormative and anti-transphobic discussion of the matter in the form of a fictional decision on an appeal against the original decision.

The QJP legacy

Contributions in this QJP book combine queer approaches with feminist, trans, critical race, decolonial, heritage, reproductive, decarceration, disability and ecological approaches - all of which have a strong relevance for children. Our hope is that this book will inspire others to consider queer angles to their own work, and nurture combinations of theoretical frameworks that join efforts in broader social justice issues and movements, including in matters related to children.

We are now working on a range of other outputs that fulfil the aims of the project, including a special journal issue and a range of creative outputs. If you'd like to get involved with the project in any capacity, perhaps focusing on children, feel free to get in touch - join our queer dance!

Queer Judgements Project
(<https://www.queerjudgments.org/get-involved->)

Trialling a Youth Research Advisory Network in CIRCY

Kirsty Fraser (CIRCY Doctoral Researcher & Research Assistant)

My doctoral research, supported and funded by CIRCY, explores how young people can be meaningfully involved as research advisors, with a specific focus on designing and trialling a Youth Research Advisory Network at the University of Sussex.

Young people can often be invited to have a voice in research, and my research focuses on understanding what motivates young people to get involved in research, what obstacles they encounter, and how we can develop a model that supports engaging, long-term collaboration between young people and researchers that is mutually beneficial. Whilst there are many fantastic examples of young research advisory groups, this study will explore an area that is less well researched. Rather than setting up a single, fixed advisory group or panel, I'm trialling a more flexible, networked approach. The Young Research Advisors Network I'm piloting will bring together young people aged 11-17 from a range of local settings, including schools, youth centres, and community groups across East and West Sussex, who connect with research teams in ways that suit their interests, availability, and needs.

In the early stages of the project, I'll be working with young people in local schools and youth groups to explore their views on research. These conversations will help to unpack young people's perspectives of research more generally, such as its purpose, who should or could do research, and its impacts. This data will be valuable and interesting in its own right, but also will help shape the other later stages of the project.

The next stage of the project will involve conducting two focus groups. One with young people who are already engaged as research advisors, and another with researchers or ethics committee members. The purpose of these focus groups is to explore why individuals choose to get involved in research or advisory roles, as well as to identify the barriers and enablers that young people face when participating in research, as well as the barriers stakeholders face in involving young people.

The final phase of the project involves connecting young advisors with existing research projects based at the University of Sussex. This is where the recruited young research advisors will test the network model. Young people will be invited to advise on real studies; this could involve tasks such as shaping research questions, inputting into research bids, reviewing materials, and helping to interpret findings. They might also consider how to effectively share their results with other young people or the wider public.

I'm developing this network using a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach, which means that the young people involved aren't just helping me gather data, they're co-researchers. Together, we're building the network, shaping how it runs, and exploring what meaningful involvement might look like. Together we will reflect on our experiences of exploring the network as a model of involving young people in research in a sustainable and mutually beneficial way.

One of the things I've found most exciting about this work is the potential of the network model. Traditional advisory groups, though beneficial in many ways, can potentially be rigid and unintentionally exclude young people with other commitments or those who can't attend regular meetings. The network might offer more flexibility; it will be interesting to see if young people can engage in ways that suit them, dip in and out as needed, and still make meaningful contributions. My role as a researcher is to listen, to learn, and to explore if a network structure might be a successful model in the future.

This work is informed by CIRCY's commitment to participatory, child-centred research. CIRCY has been instrumental in supporting this project, not only through my studentship but also through its ethos. The centre's focus on children's rights, reflexivity, and creative research methods has shaped how I approach the work and challenged me to think critically about how we involve young people in research, and why.

If you are involved in a youth setting/ school/ community group and think that your young people might be interested in this project, I would love to hear from you (K.Fraser@sussex.ac.uk). Similarly, if you are involved in a research project linked to the University of Sussex and would welcome working with some young research advisors, please get in touch.

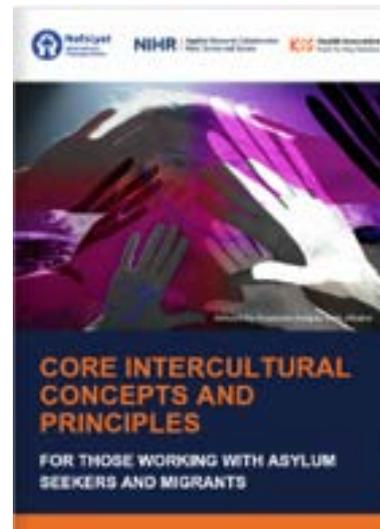
From awareness to action: Evaluating the implementation of an Intercultural Awareness training for the workforce supporting Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

**Devyn Glass (Psychology)
& Claire Vella (Psychology)**

Post-doctoral researchers Devyn Glass and Claire Vella collaborated with Health Innovation Kent, Surrey, Sussex (HIKSS), Nafsiyat Intercultural Therapy Centre, and the Leaving Care Team at Kent County Council to co-design an Intercultural Awareness training tailored to the needs of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). The project was in response to a multi-stakeholder 'Migrant Mental Health Community of Practice', which highlighted the complex challenges children and young people face before, during, and after seeking asylum. Hostile environments and inadequate service provision mean their cultural, social, and developmental needs are frequently unmet, contributing to challenges with mental health. The Community of Practice identified workforce intercultural training as a priority to better support UASC's mental health.

The training was delivered by HIKSS and Nafsiyat to over 100 individuals supporting UASC from Local Authorities, education, health and social care, VCSEs, and emergency services across Kent, Surrey, and Sussex. It focused on intercultural therapeutic approaches, different cultural conceptions of mental health, and encouraged personal reflective practice and shared learning to embed intercultural awareness into organisations.

The project researchers evaluated the implementation outcomes of the training to assess the impact on the working practice of attendees and the wider workforce, and to understand, and subsequently address, barriers and facilitators to implementation. The training was perceived as acceptable and appropriate for the workforce supporting UASC. Attendees described positively applying concepts learnt from the training to their work with young people and emphasised the significant impact it had on their individual working practice. However, the impact on the wider workforce appeared limited due to perceived relational and systemic barriers. Colleagues' attitudes were strongly asserted as a barrier for participants to adopt new practices and to promote a culture of intercultural awareness, with colleagues who had not attended the



training seeming reluctant to change the way they work. A lack of organisational buy-in was also highlighted as an obstacle to change at an organisational level. Attendees reflected upon the need for workplace culture shifts, driven by management and top-down organisational changes.

The results of the evaluation were used to produce a '[Core Intercultural Concepts and Principles Toolkit](#)', which includes practical tips for organisations to embed intercultural practices at a system-level. To address the barriers identified in the evaluation, the recommendations are targeted at managers and service leaders to support culturally sensitive working practices through quality, on-going training, reflective practice, and involvement of young people in design and evaluation of services.

The evaluation findings and toolkit were disseminated through the Southeast Regional Migrant Network at a dedicated Southeast Race and Health event. The online event attracted broad interest, with over 200 people signed up including representatives from the Refugee Council, Local Authorities, emergency services, DWP, the Home Office, and a range of VCSEs. The project has led to collaborations between HIKSS and the Office for Health Improvements and Disparities (OHID) who will now scale the training to a further 120 members of the workforce supporting UASC. Following a national event with health professionals, OHID identified school nurses, health visitors, and specialist midwives as key contacts for UASC and their families. While the training offer will be based on the evaluated training programme, it will also be tailored for school nurses, health visitors, and midwives through the use of consultation and bespoke input from representatives from these professions. A training toolkit and video will be made available to disseminate nationally.

How to shape administrative data research with care-experienced young people? Reflections and lessons learned from the Empowered Inquiry project

Dr Jeongeun Park (Research Fellow in ESW)

Audrey Mubaiwa (co-researcher)

Jade Webb (co-researcher)

Involving the public in administrative data research has become more important than ever to generate high-quality research with maximum benefits to them (ADR UK, 2021; UKRI, 2019). Administrative data research refers to a study involving the analysis of data routinely collected on populations by governments, such as social care records. The benefits of administrative data research are well-recognised; however, it often excludes the voice or input of the young people it represents. Despite ongoing efforts to address this limitation, young people as Experts by Experience (EBE) remain insufficiently involved from the inception of administrative data research, especially when it involves quantitative methods. This spotlight is co-produced with EBE co-researchers to share reflections and lessons learned from the Empowered Inquiry project, where we collaborated to strengthen the directions of a new research proposal involving the administrative data.

About the Empowered Inquiry project

Building on the ReThink research programme and with funding support from the Researcher-led Initiative Fund, University of Sussex, the innovative Empowered Inquiry project was launched to collaborate with three young person care-experienced paid co-researchers from December 2024 to July 2025. We co-designed and co-delivered two stakeholder consultation workshops with care-experienced young people to inform the new quantitatively focused research project.

1. Foster young people's engagement through motivation

"I wanted to have the opportunity of making sure that voices are heard, but also hear other people's experiences and understand what they went/ are going through. I also wanted to be involved to see what changes can be made to ensure people feel important, seen, and heard"(Mubaiwa, co-researcher).

From the outset of the project, we had multiple conversations to share our motivations and establish shared goals and ways of working. We used this opportunity to discuss early on how the co-researchers could obtain meaningful outcomes for themselves from participating in the project. This helped us to achieve a sense of an equal partnership and supported sustained engagement throughout the project.

The results of the evaluation were used to produce a 'Core Intercultural Concepts and Principles Toolkit', which includes practical tips for organisations to embed intercultural practices at a system-level. To address the barriers identified in the evaluation, the recommendations are targeted at managers and service leaders to support culturally sensitive working practices through quality, on-going training, reflective practice, and involvement of young people in design and evaluation of services.

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2. Make research activities enjoyable but challenging in ways that benefit co-researchers

The co-researchers highlighted that their participation helped advance their career development by understanding the social research process, learning to better organise tasks, and improving their public speaking skills. They enjoyed the consultation workshops by learning about the views of other care-experienced young people. Meanwhile, they acknowledged facing challenges during the project but expressed how these challenges contributed to their ongoing learning and personal development.

“The most challenging part of the project was keeping the track workshops, keeping people calm and focused on the task at hand. I helped overcome this by explaining the aims and goals of the project in simpler, clearer terms”
(Webb, co-researcher)

“I was really nervous to talk to people and speak in front of groups, but I managed to build my confidence and get more confident speaking in front of people. I’m continuing to speak in front of people to get more used to it”
(Mubaiwa, co-researcher)

3. Recognise diversity, boundaries, and planning in promoting successful engagement

“Be respectful and mindful; everyone’s different and has different experience. Also to be understanding, that some people might have triggers and to understand any set boundaries. We don’t fit the “one size fits all” box and we are unique and different individuals”
(Mubaiwa, co-researcher)

“The advice I would give to anyone planning to work with care-experienced co-researchers is to communicate regularly and delegate tasks early on. In this project, these factors certainly helped make everyone feel useful and included”
(Webb, co-researcher).

In this project, we were fortunate to have the opportunity to thoughtfully and deliberately plan sufficient lead time to prepare the workshops. This was valued by the co-researcher, especially to be flexible and enhance the sense of belonging in the project. This also helped the co-researchers to develop their capacity by building a solid understanding of the project, tasks and skills required. From an academic researcher’s perspective, having this space and ongoing dialogue with the co-researchers was pivotal to building a mutual and respectful relationship with the co-researchers and making the consultation workshops accessible to young people and inclusive.

Overall, through this collaborative effort, we have successfully captured care-experienced young people’s voices to inform the new research agenda that promotes the meaningful use of administrative data. Collaborating with the co-researchers enabled us to build a research proposal that can empower the care-experienced group. Achieving quality collaboration required considerable investment in time, money, and thoughtful planning. We hope that the three insights we have shared can serve as broad recommendations for future public engagement activities, especially with the under-served populations.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dr Jeri L. Damman (co-investigator), Theo Duarte Niemen (co-researcher), Professor Lisa Holmes (mentor), Rebecca Watts, Brighton and Hove City Council Youth Participation team, and the University of Sussex for their kind support with the project.

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Tiny Human Dramas

Charlie Rumsby (Social Work)

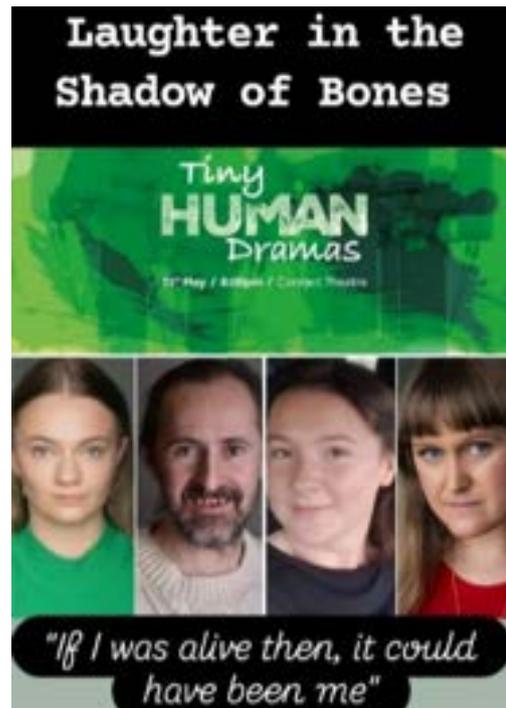
For a while I have wondered what it would be like to dramatise my ethnographic research. As a multimodal anthropologist I view ethnography as an evolving research practice, whereby storytelling becomes a central feature of research dissemination. The modalities which I have invested in, to story tell, have included photography, film, illustration and music composition. Theatre was a stone unturned, until recently when I saw an intriguing call to participate in the 'Tiny Human Dramas' project.

The Tiny Human Dramas initiative at the University of Manchester is an innovative project that bridges anthropology and theatre to bring ethnographic research to life on stage. Spearheaded by Dr. Meghan Rose Donnelly, along with Dr. Alexandra D'Onofrio and playwright Laura Sophie Helbig, the project transforms anthropological fieldwork into compelling short plays through collaborative efforts with theatre professionals.

The initiative aims to amplify anthropological research by making it accessible and engaging to broader audiences through the medium of theatre. This is a high energy project that unfolds rapidly. The culmination of the project is a performance event where five anthropologists are each paired with a theatre ensemble. Each team has just 24 hours to create a 10-minute play based on the anthropologist's field research. These plays are then performed together in a single evening, followed by an open discussion with the audience about the collaborative process and the insights gained from this interdisciplinary approach.

Laughter in the Shadow of Bones

The story I brought to the stage was born of oral histories shared with me by Cambodian and Vietnamese families during my research, stories of survival, displacement, and identity during and after the Khmer Rouge regime (Rumsby, 2025). Working with a dedicated ensemble, that included actors [Catherine Joyce](#), [Charlotte Elizabeth Langley](#), and [Anthony Webster](#), we shaped those stories into a piece titled "Laughter in the Shadow of Bones", a journey that began with the chilling memory of the evacuation of Phnom Penh in 1975 shared by a mother to their daughter, and then the experience of schoolchildren confronting the haunting faces of genocide victims at the infamous Tuol Sleng Prison.



What made this piece particularly meaningful to me was the decision to perform as myself, an anthropologist who volunteered as a teacher during my fieldwork at a local informal school that educated some of Cambodia's stateless children. These students, born in Cambodia yet denied access to state education due to their undocumented status, had only a fragmented understanding of the genocide that shaped their families' histories. Their questions were raw and urgent: "Why kill babies?" and "If I lived then, would I be killed?" I organised the trip as part of some history lessons I gave at the school with the belief that history should not be inherited in silence. I gathered care givers permissions, covered costs for those who couldn't afford the trip, and with these students we confronted history, and their place in it, with quiet courage.

Tiny Human Dramas gave me the space to reflect on how anthropologists are often implicated in the very stories we try to document, not just thinking about our participants, but feeling with them.

Each performance required a sentence from fieldwork to be embedded in the play. Ours a powerful refrain, spoken by a chorus of voices:

"If I was alive then... it could have been me."



Bus Scene, on the way to Phnom Penh's Toul Sleng Museum

Scene at Phnom Penh's Toul Sleng Museum



[photo credits: Natalie Marchant]

It echoed through the theatre, anchoring our audience in the reality that history isn't distant, it's lived, felt, and sometimes, repeated in whispers through generations. For me, Tiny Human Dramas wasn't just about storytelling. It was about accounting for lived experience, in all its grief, beauty, and resilience.

The CIRCY PGR community

The CIRCY PGR network has continued to meet and share knowledge and support throughout the year. We encourage all doctoral researchers with an interest in research that has children, childhood and youth at the centre to make contact and join our network.

Three CIRCY PGR members completed their doctorate this last year and we extend our congratulations to Drs Alejandro Farieta Barrera, Anna Ridgewell, and Rosalind Willi.

Alejandro Farieta Barrera successfully defended his PhD thesis in April on 'Policy reforms for Initial Teacher Education courses in Colombia 2014–2018. A Critical Realist Impact Evaluation'. His project was an impact evaluation of new policies for teacher education courses in Colombia that emerged during the peace negotiations in 2014. The impact evaluation follows a critical realist approach, focusing not only on the success of the reforms but also on the different mechanisms, tensions, and challenges of implementing the new policies. For his research, he followed a mixed-methods approach, combining a difference-in-differences statistical technique with fieldwork with key actors in implementing the reforms. Alejandro was supervised by Prof Mario Novelli, Prof Lisa Holmes and Dr Marcos Delprato.

Anna Ridgewell's viva took place in March, and she successfully defended her thesis "Growing up Green? Disrupting neoliberalist and anthropocentric constructions of nature in primary and early educational space." Anna's PhD project used a mixed-method, multi-sited, multiple perspective approach to explore the everyday experiences of children and adults in the outside spaces of educational and ECEC settings and how they respond to and value nature in these spaces. It also explored how children's access to the outdoors is mediated by practitioners, in the face of austerity policies and neoliberal ideologies that have simultaneously reduced state intervention in the provision of childcare



Alejandro (centre) at graduation with Lisa Holmes and Mario Novelli [credit: Alejandro Farieta Barrera]

and education, but increased state surveillance through the regulatory landscape. More information can be found about Anna's work in the photo essay in the centre of this report (see p.15). Anna was supervised by Prof Charles Watters and Dr Liam Berriman.

Rosalind Willi successfully defended her thesis at the start of 2025, titled 'Homecoming or last resort? Exploring children's wellbeing in situations of displacement and return.' Her thesis focused on the wellbeing of Syrian Armenian children in situations of displacement and return. Rosalind has written about her PhD journey here, where she discusses her fieldwork, methodologies, and experiences during her doctoral research at IDS: <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/my-phd-journey-working-with-children-as-active-agents-for-change> Rosalind's supervisors were Dr Dorte Thorsen and Dr Keetie Roelen.



Anna (centre) at graduation with Liam Berriman (left) and Charles Watters (right) [credit: Anna Ridgwell]

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