

ANNUAL REPORT 2022/23

CIRCY

CENTRE FOR INNOVATION AND RESEARCH IN
CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

us
UNIVERSITY
OF SUSSEX

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The cover image has been provided by Laila (a young person from Safer London) as part of her participation in the AHRC funded study Imagining Resistance through Participatory Photography (Grant reference AH/T003685/1). Other images in this report were provided by children through a CIRCY art competition on 'where I live'. The prize winning images were produced by Lila (age 7) and Olive (age 10).

The Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY) is a pan-university research centre 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, 2022-2023, the Centre has continued to grow, increasing our membership across disciplines, establishing new projects, and building academic and public engagement locally, nationally and internationally. Following the relaxing of the pandemic restrictions, we have reintroduced face-to-face events, but still supplemented these with hybrid and online activities, including seminars and networking events, as many of our members welcomed the flexibility and safety that these forms of communion can provide. The support of research bidding and academic writing has continued apace, and we have continued to be successful in grant capture, the delivery of projects, and in publications, some of which we spotlight in this report.

CIRCY was established in September 2012 and we celebrated its 10th anniversary in the autumn of 2022 with a celebratory symposium, fronted by two keynote speakers at the forefront of theory and practice research – see p. 50. We're delighted to mark the end of CIRCY's first decade with two important markers of recognition. First, the recent announcement that CIRCY has been awarded Centre of Excellence status – one of the university's [‘pillars of strength’](#) which are progressing highly innovative and potentially transformative research. This fantastic recognition cements childhood and youth research as a priority area for the University and gives recognition to the distinctive and creative interdisciplinary research culture that has been developed by the successive directors of the Centre and all of the wider membership. More information about our Centre of Excellence status can be found later in the report. Second, our flagship BA Childhood and Youth: Theory and Practice has been ranked number one in the UK for Childhood and Youth Studies in the [Complete University Guide 2024](#). We're really excited to begin this next phase of CIRCY's life, which will involve developing our international links and further consolidating CIRCY's role as a leader of child-centred approaches to research, practice and policy.

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. We have ordered these around some of our research themes and areas around which our work is coalescing:

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.

- 'Good childhoods', ordinary lives and (extra)ordinary children
- Emotional lives
- Working with professionals and systems to support children, young people and families
- Spotlighting the Innovate Project
- Digital Childhoods
- Imaginative methodologies

CIRCY Leadership

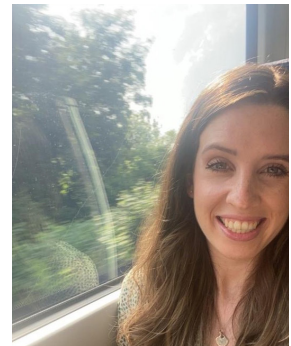
CIRCY has been led this year by Michelle Lefevre (Social Work) with Liam Berriman (Childhood and Youth) as Co-Director. As summer 2023 marks the culmination of Michelle's four year directorship of CIRCY, Liam now takes on the director baton for the next stage of CIRCY's journey as a Centre of Excellence. We have also been ably supported by Brontë McDonald (Psychology) as CIRCY's new postgraduate research assistant.



Michelle Lefevre



Liam Berriman



Brontë McDonald

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); Dorte Thoreson (Institute of Development Studies); Simon Flacks (Law); Hannah Field (English); Jo Moran-Ellis (Sociology); and Kirsty Pattrick (Mass Observation Archive).

Michelle will remain involved on CIRCY's steering group, as has been the model for previous directors. 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](#) for an informal chat.

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 Sünker - Professor of Social Pedagogy, Begische Universität, 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 at 10 years, and looking forward to our next 10 years

This last academic year has been a very exciting time to be involved in CIRCY, and has been a particular honour for me as I prepared to take over the Directorship of CIRCY from Michelle Lefevre this summer.

Firstly, it has marked ten years of CIRCY. I joined Sussex less than a year after CIRCY had been set up, and the centre has played an important role in shaping who I am as a researcher. CIRCY has always felt a highly vibrant hub of activity, with regular seminars and workshops that bring together colleagues from across the university. To mark this important anniversary we held a special symposium in December with guest speakers Prof Sonia Livingstone OBE and Prof Carlene Firmin MBE. Both spoke to key issues and challenges of supporting children in a fast changing world, and the value of research that centre's children in our thinking and practice.

Secondly, CIRCY has successfully become one 12 new Centres of Excellence at the University of Sussex, after a highly competitive internal application process, and will retain this status for the next five years. This is a great affirmation of the work that we do, and it highlights childhood and youth studies as a priority research focus for Sussex over the next five years.

The new Centres of Excellence were officially launched at a House of Commons reception on Wednesday 11 July, in a reception hosted

by Brighton MP Caroline Lucas and attended by representatives of all 12 Centres as well as other MPs, local authorities, and policy makers.

In addition to receiving greater external promotion by the University, our Centre of Excellence status will also be supported by an award of £100k from the strategic development fund to be used over the next five years. This will enable us to advertise for a new fully-funded PhD scholarship for the centre, as well as funds to support our development of links with international partners. This award marks an exciting new chapter for CIRCY, and I look forward to talking with members about our future plans for the centre over the coming year and how it can help support your work.

Finally, I'd like to take this opportunity to offer my immense thanks to Michelle, who is standing down as CIRCY's Director after four years (and three years prior to that as Co-director). I think I can speak for everyone when I say we are hugely appreciative of everything she has done to lead and grow the centre. Not least, during the highly challenging times of Covid-19, and ensuring that the centre continued to provide a supportive space for colleagues. I have big shoes to fill, and I'm looking forward to working with you all as we set the wheels in motion for our next ten years!

Liam Berriman, July 2023



CIRCY Director Liam Berriman (left) at the launch of the Centres of Excellence at Parliament in July 2023

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. We have an active social media presence, with a Twitter feed and blog. Students continue to register for our Childhood and Youth PhD and you will see spotlight contributions from 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

As mentioned above, we are delighted that this year our undergraduate degree in Childhood and Youth Studies moved up two positions to become 1st out of 45 other university providers. We have some news on our students. Ronnie Fung was the first winner of the new BA Childhood & Youth Award for Outstanding Courage and Resolve, given for completing her degree whilst facing exceptional challenges beyond her control. This year, Yanna Erikson and Ellie Flynn have been funded as part of the University's Junior Research Associate (JRA) Scheme. Ellie's research fellowship will allow her to explore teachers' understanding and experiences

of the intersection between behaviour and potential. Yanna will be undertaking research to explore young people with autism's views on practices of 'sharenting' (social media sharing of children's lives by parents/carers) and rights to consent. Both projects will feature in a JRA poster exhibition at the start of the Autumn term.

We spotlight below the dissertation findings of graduating student Hannah Eastwell, as well those of Maeve Tully who won the BACY dissertation prize for her outstanding research project.

‘Exploring practitioner and parent (carer) perspectives on the awareness of FASD in the UK’

Hannah Eastwell

For my undergraduate dissertation I explored practitioner and parent (carer) perspectives on the awareness of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) in the UK. I interviewed a director of a support group for parents of children with FASD and conducted a second interview with two grandparents with Special Guardianship Orders for their grandchildren with FASD.

My literature review allowed me to explore FASD, its identification and prevalence, as well as the support needs for children with FASD and their families and the current policy. It became evident that many children and their families are facing the consequences of a national lack of awareness and support. It was important to me to include those with lived experience and include their voices as an unheard element of the population. I am thankful that I have had the opportunity to do this.

By drawing on their expertise as ‘experts by experience’, we could explore what policy should be doing and what the ideal pathways of care would look like for them. I identified the key themes from the primary data as: stigma; the parent as the expert; fighting systems; the ideal situation; and implications for support. We had pertinent conversations about the need for respite, safeguarding and education. Participants opened up about the realities of living with FASD and their struggles in accessing support. I really appreciated how honest and open my participants were and truly valued the contributions they made.

Although I highlight recent improvements in awareness with recent campaigns and policies, including the NICE guidelines and various resources from FASD charities, there is still a need for wider awareness, and this must be prevalent across all services. I include suggestions for how this may be achieved.

‘Exploring cross-cultural exchange from the perspective of young English tutors’ lived experiences’

Maeve Tully

This study aimed to illuminate the wider affordances of exchange experiences by looking at the lived experiences of young English tutors, offering a different perspective to existing literature. My motivations for this research came from my personal experience as an English Tutor in June 2022, when I stayed with an Italian host family for 3 weeks. I place great value on the experience in terms of the personal growth it stimulated, which motivated me to conduct research that problematised the assumption that the primary value of exchange is for language acquisition. Overall, this study explored the positioning of young people as passive recipients of cross-cultural exchange by illuminating their agency and contribution to mutual exchange. It has particular pertinence within the current national context, where cross-cultural exchange opportunities are declining due to multifaceted social changes such as Brexit and COVID-19.

The research aimed to make a modest contribution to understanding exchange experiences by evaluating their potential positive implications for young individuals. Collecting primary data in the form of a multiple case study approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the impact of exchange experiences from multiple perspectives. I conducted semi-structured interviews with five English tutors and, through thematic analysis of the interview data, nuanced experiences and perceptions were uncovered.

The findings illuminated a political point about how we view youth as they progress into emerging adulthood in terms of expectations and normative ideas of success. Additionally, the study highlighted the value of short-term exchange experiences on a personal level, beyond language learning, in terms of fostering a global outlook and developing personal attributes that may not be developed through instrumental teaching. For example, the government’s Turing Scheme was identified as a pivotal advancement in promoting equitable access to cross-cultural exchange experiences to cultivate a more diverse and interconnected educational landscape. I concluded that moving forward, bureaucratic processes and funding provisions for exchange experiences must be considered further by governments and education systems to maximise accessibility to collective and individual benefits for young people.

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 mother's experiences of local baby groups, and how international humanitarian workers engage with psycho-social interventions for conflict-affected children.

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

Karen Marwick's 'The Emotional World of Preschool Children: A Narrative Analysis'

This study was concerned with emotions and childhood. Emotional development has come to feature as key area for enhancing positive outcomes across the whole life course, with childhood being seen as an important life stage and various interventions and policies exist to enable children to develop positive ways of understanding and managing emotions. Emotions are seen as concepts with various meanings in various academic disciplines and it is of interest to note how these various meanings are being used in practice and research. With the discourse of emotions growing, my dissertation took an interest in including children's voices in that current discourse. I took a constructionist position, viewing knowledge as shared through interactions with others and the environment. In order to gather data that engaged with child voice, the data collection process sought to establish stories regarding emotions to facilitate. A narrative analysis was undertaken that revealed that the children in the study highly valued interpersonal relationships and were able to understand emotions in various ways. It must be noted that this was a small study and the findings remain provisional to the context of the research. It was not the aim of the study to reveal objective truths, but rather offer insight into the emotional world of preschool children with the aim of enhancing practice and opening up new avenues of research.

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

Shiori Tagawa's 'Understanding the Role of Host Families in Supporting Displaced "War Orphans" in the DRC'

Despite being nearly twice as numerous as refugees, 'internally displaced persons' is an area of development where aid and research are insufficient. Furthermore, among internally displaced persons, there are few studies on internally displaced war orphans (IDOs) who have lost their homes and parents due to conflicts. Local people such as relatives (host families) take care of the IDOs who are currently abandoned by the world. This mixed methods study started with the purpose of exploring the roles and needs of host families who care for IDOs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the DRC). First, a survey of 10 host families was used to identify the background of each family and the IDOs they care for. Subsequently, three participants were selected for semi-structured online interviews to explore further details. The findings indicated that host families play an important role in meeting the basic needs of IDOs and need support to increase their income. Nonetheless, all participants indicated that their IDOs place with them was permanent, in line with the African culture of kinship care. More than half of the participants lived with IDOs even though one of the IDOs' parents were still alive. While this study reveals that host families play an important role in the protection and upbringing of IDOs, it also suggests that increased support, which includes understanding the individual backgrounds of those host families, may be necessary to promote the best interests of IDOs.

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

[Our CIRCY Blog.](#)

Spotlighting our research

Good childhoods', everyday lives, and (extra)ordinary children

This conceptual area encourages us to engage critically with normative assumptions about 'good' childhoods, and 'ordinary' (and conversely, 'extraordinary') lives and children. It reminds us to recognise the diverse and contingent meanings of childhood, as well as the ways in which global processes may cut across these in the expression of powerful ideas of what a 'good childhood' or an 'ordinary childhood' should or could be. Some research within this theme also considers categories of children and young people whose circumstances are 'extraordinary', placing them outside of normative ideals. Other areas of critical inquiry prompt us to consider the ways in which categorisations of vulnerability or difference may function as a dividing practice, neglecting the 'ordinary' aspects of 'extraordinary' lives, practices and relationships, and potentially adding to the stigmatisation and disadvantage that young people face.

This year we have included three very different spotlights under this theme. In the first, Nicola Yuill (Psychology) discusses the use of participatory research to co-create video stories with autistic children and young people. In the second, Lisa Holmes, Tamsin Hinton Smith and Claire Durrant (Education) share some insights from their evaluation of a project supporting care leavers in prison and on release. Finally, in 'Playing in the Archive', Ben Highmore (Media and Film) discusses his recent work on playgrounds.

Spotlight 1 on 'Good childhoods', everyday lives, and (extra)ordinary children

Releasing unheard voices through Our Stories: Using participatory research to co-create video stories with autistic children and young people

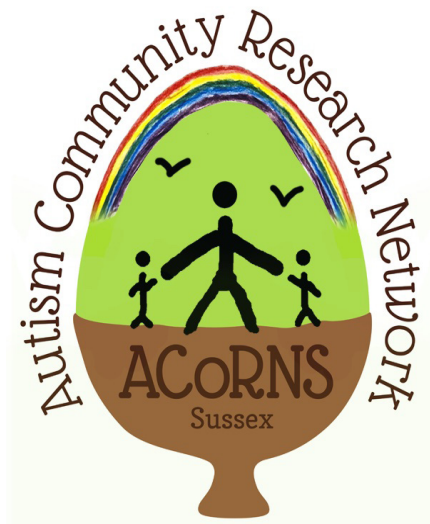
Nicola Yuill, School of Psychology, @chatlabuk @acornsussex

'Nothing about us without us' is a succinct and powerful expression of how crucial it is to have the full informed views of children and young people in plans for their education, health and care. But what happens for children who may not speak, or have a learning disability or a condition such as autism? Too often, a section on a child's Education Health and Care Plan might just say "not able to give his view". How do we elicit and represent children's own understandings and perspectives to inform plans for the support they need?



The Autism Community Research Network Sussex (ACoRNS for short) exists to support and develop participatory methods of research in autism. Our most recent project was a 1-year ESRC research methods grant on developing ways of capturing perspectives of children and young people by supporting them to create video stories.

This work developed from a major digital stories project at the University of Southampton, led by Sarah Parsons and Hanna Kovshoff, establishing a method of capturing young autistic children's perspectives through co-creating video stories, working with the children and their teachers in special schools. The Our Stories grant helped us jointly develop these methods further. At Sussex, the team of Nicola Yuill, Samantha Holt and Devyn Glass ran two projects, working with partners in health and education.



First, health. We know there are huge barriers to providing accessible health care: for example, dental health is shockingly poor for autistic children, with real associated health risks. From an autistic child's perspective, the dental surgery can be a sensory nightmare: strong smells, shiny surfaces, bright lights and instruments probing in the mouth with a looming face overhead. We were so fortunate that in 2019, the Brighton & Sussex Medical School (BSMS) agreed to let us work with their new initiative, Time for Autism (TfA). TfA, modelled on the award-winning BSMS project Time for Dementia, involves medical students visiting a family with an autistic child twice over the course of a year, as part of their training. The idea is that this gives trainee medics a real experience of life with an autistic child, giving greater empathy and understanding of their needs. Our Stories worked with three families and with two medical students, supporting each partner to create a 3-5 minute digital story about their lives – likes, interests, communication style, for example. We used different techniques such as wearcams, and shared guidance to create storyboards. The participants shared their videos before the visits.

The families really welcomed the strengths-based approach we took:

“[we] thought about what he really likes... what are the things we love about him and that we think he would like other people to know about him”.

It helped build trust:

“you could go into the things that are extremely challenging because you knew that they already knew that he was a lovely boy”

and they felt that the stories represented their family well:

“it captured it to a T, that is our life..., to a T, very much”

The students appreciated seeing a video rather than just reading a written report:


“I think it's far more effective”.

Second, we looked at the experience of autistic young people in mainstream secondary schools, this time with a focus on how they managed the tricky transition times in their day, say from getting from home to school or moving from one lesson to another. Again, we were really lucky to work with a great partner, the Just Right project in Brighton and Hove schools that supports people to manage emotions during the school day. Three young people spent time creating their own videos of how they managed these transitions, having to think really hard about how to represent their experiences. They were supported by Our Stories and school staff, as well as having specialist filming and editing support from Our Stories partner Autek, an autism tech company with a neurodiverse team who specialise in making places accessible, using the most amazing 360 degree virtual tours through their 'What's it Like' web app.

The learners mentioned it was 'a ton of fun' and enjoyed being able to share, discuss and represent experiences with other autistic learners. Parents felt it was very worthwhile, one noting how the experience was 'heartwarming, funny, at times sad'.

A major mark of the power of the project is that almost all our participants agreed for their stories to be shared widely – very important in representing diverse voices. Everything that's needed to co-create the stories is up on the Our Stories website, with the video stories, and also on the [NCRM website](#).

Continuing this work feels crucial to give autistic children and young people agency and voice in being supported to develop and thrive, and we're now working with practitioners on social care and health to develop and share the approach.



OUR STORIES...

Project for Supporting Children's Transitions


1

Why is supporting transitions important?

Transitions can include the everyday kind, such as going to and from school, or from the classroom to the playground.

Transitions can also happen at certain times of life, for example moving from primary to secondary school, or into work or college after school.

We know that transitions can often be experienced as difficult for children and families and so it is important to find ways to make transitions easier for everyone.



What is the 'Our Stories' project?

The 'Our Stories' project used two different kinds of videos that we have found can help with transitions:

'Our Stories' project







I am...

We are...

What do we learn by developing and joining these two perspectives?

Find out more online

To view 'I am' video examples visit acorns-soton.org.uk

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Spotlight 2 on ‘Good childhoods’, everyday lives, and (extra)ordinary children

An evaluation of ‘Always Hope’, a project supporting care leavers in prison and on release

Lisa Holmes, Tamsin Hinton Smith and Claire Durrant (Education)

We have been contracted to evaluate Always Hope, an intervention aimed at reducing reoffending and improving outcomes for young men (aged 18-25) in the West Midlands who have been in both the care system and prison. The evaluation is being funded by the Innovation Unit (IU), a not-for-profit social enterprise leading delivery of the intervention.

Young people with experience of care are over-represented in the prison system (Berman, 2023) and are at greater risk of reoffending when they are released (Ministry of Justice, 2013). Whilst there are many examples of good practice by committed practitioners, support by professionals from the prison and probation service and local authority leaving care services can lack cohesion, leading to gaps and duplications in provision. Always Hope aims to improve how these practitioners work together to provide support for care experienced young people in prison and on release. Through Integrated Planning and Assessment (IPAA) practitioners are supported to work together to form coordinated plans with the young adult and there is also support for care leavers in prison to connect with a positive and sustainable network of friends, family and community members.

The evaluation is a mixed methods research design that combines qualitative research with a process evaluation to understand the implementation and mechanisms of service delivery. The qualitative research focuses on the views and experiences of the young men and the key adults engaged in supporting them, including practitioners working in local authorities, probation and prisons and members of the young people’s support network of family and friends.

Central to the whole evaluation is the voice of the young people themselves. So far, we have completed seven interviews with young men in prison, with more prison and post-release interviews still to come, alongside planned interviews with family members. We have also interviewed over 40 professionals working with the young men inside and outside prison.

The unpredictability of prison regimes and the young men’s wider lives necessitates a responsive approach to carrying out the evaluation – lengthy and bureaucratic approval processes are required; prisoners are moved around at short notice or not permitted to join certain activities for a range of reasons; prisons go under lock down; and in the case of one of our prison interview days, fire alarms go off; all rendering it a challenge to effectively plan for data collection. We are mindful that these vulnerable young people may be guarded about what they disclose to us as ‘professionals’, and of the need to gain their trust and make them feel safe and recognised, within a limited timeframe. Prison rules prevented us from taking props such as ‘fidget toys’ into prison to support the interview process with this vulnerable group of young men as we had hoped, but we were able to take pens and paper as a substitute concentration tool for them to engage with while they spoke to us. As well as talking about their experiences of the support they have received from practitioners they shared their hopes for the future, alongside stories of being in care and in prison that show the links between experiences of the care system, disconnection from networks of family support, and prison, within the young men’s lives:

'That's when I started going care. Then I got kicked out of that house. I don't know. There was just loads of stuff that was going on. And literally went jail not long after. My mum was already back by Africa then, so she wanted me to go back to her house. Come out six months. Been out for six months and I come back to jail again, and I've been in jail since.' (Young man in prison)

Interviewing in prisons is complex, and the process has not been easy - from attaining ethical approval from the prison and probation service and each of the three local authorities to securing agreement from several gatekeepers and getting consent from the young people themselves to participate in the research. However, when young people are placed at the centre of the research and a suitable environment is secured to carry out interviews effectively, this holds the potential to generate rich insight, not only about the impact of Always Hope, but about the lives of a vulnerable group of young people.

Berman, G. (2013) Prison population statistics. Available at: http://www.antonioacasella.eu/nume/Berman_2013.pdf (Accessed: June 2023)

Ministry of Justice (2013) The factors associated with proven re-offending following release from prison: findings from Waves 1 to 3 of SPCR Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/results-from-the-surveying-prisoner-crime-reduction-survey> (Accessed: June 2023)

Spotlight 3 on 'Good childhoods', everyday lives, and (extra)ordinary children

Playing in the Archive

Ben Highmore (Media and Film)

For the last year I've been researching and writing about playgrounds, particularly the experimental playgrounds that emerged in the mid-1940s. The first of these was a junk-playground (Skrammellegeplads) set up on a worker's cooperative housing estate on the outskirts of Copenhagen. This was in 1943 when Denmark was occupied by the Nazi and Danish parents were concerned that the sort of adventurous play that teenagers took part in might be mistaken for sabotage by the German soldiers, and that they would get carted off to prison or worse. Better, they thought, to contain it within a playground where creative destruction, as well as den building with scrap materials, could be encouraged. During my work I got particularly interested in an experimental adventure playground in Lambeth in London. It only lasted for five and a half years (1955-60) but it was hugely influential. I tell the story of this playground in an article coming out later this year in the History Workshop Journal. I wrote an article about some of my playground research for The Conversation, which can be found here: [The Conversation Article](#). I've got another Conversation article on playgrounds coming out soon. This one will be on a Dutch architect who designed and built over 700 playgrounds in Amsterdam between 1947 and 1978. Today only 17 of them remain.

During the last year I've been an AHRC Leadership Fellow and as part of that grant I have been doing various talks, workshops and visits about playgrounds and my research practice. One of the highlights was a tour of Nordic countries in February. I visited eight cities in two weeks, mostly by train and ferry. In Odense (pronounced with a silent 'd' and a noisy final 'e' – something like 'on-ser') I visited the headquarters of the Kompan company which is probably the largest (certainly in terms of global distribution) playground equipment manufacturer in the world. They produce playground equipment for municipalities and much of their equipment can be enjoyed as much by wheelchair users as by non-wheelchair users. The company was started in 1970 by an avant-garde painter and you've probably all seen – and perhaps used – at least one Kompan device. The best known is the 'crazy hen' – a simple seat on the back of bright red 'hen'. The seat is fixed to a spring. You sit on the seat, hold on to the handles either side of the hen's head and rock in every and any direction. Crazy. Today playground design starts out from the safety legislation of all the territories a company intends to export to. As one of the designers put it: children are always going to break arms and legs in playgrounds, we just don't want our products to be responsible for it. Incidentally the most common cause of accidents on playgrounds is from children running into each other.

The research will culminate in a book with the unimaginative title *Playgrounds*. I'm now in the final stages of putting it together. The book will have about 80 images in it and one of the most time-consuming aspects of this is tracking down permission holders and getting an image of high enough quality to be printed in a book. I'm publishing it with Reaktion Books, a small publisher that specialise in attractive, affordable academic books, often highly illustrated, that might also be of interest to a general readership. The hope is that the book will be just under £20 which I think is a good price for something with so many images in it.

I start by looking at the playground as a child-saving movement – saving working-class kids from the juvenile courts and from traffic accidents – and end up suggesting ways that experimental playgrounds could be used as part of an urban re-wilding. The Youth Farms that are common in Germany (similar to City Farms in the UK) are to my mind a great example because they mix play and ecology, and that really needs to be the future of playgrounds.



Aldo van Eyck playground, Laurierstraat, Amsterdam City Archives/10009A003950

Emotional Lives

The theme of Emotional Lives takes account of historical and cultural contingencies, reminding us to consider the ways in which emotion expresses and confirms the materiality, relationality and sensuality of social lives. It aids the building of critical thinking about established and taken-for-granted issues in childhood and youth – whether studying young people, policy or professional practice – by thinking through the lens of emotion and affective practice.

We include four spotlights in this section. We begin with two by doctoral researchers. Brontë McDonald-Harper (Psychology), who is CIRCY's Postgraduate Research Assistant, discusses the development of a brief parent-focused interven-

tion to reduce Emotional Based School Avoidance. Rosalind Willi (Institute of Development Studies) then goes on to explore child well-being understandings in the context of social work services targeting refugee communities in Armenia. The third of this group of spotlights considers a study of whether reading fiction might improve children's empathy and pro-social skills (by Su Morris, Jane Oakhill, Alan Garnham, and Robin Banerjee – Psychology). Finally, Emilia Robinson (Psychology) looks at the development of outcome measures for the Whole School Approach in Mental Health Support Teams.

Spotlight 1 on Emotional Lives

The ISAAC programme- The development of a brief parent-focused intervention to reduce Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Brontë McDonald-Harper (Psychology)

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is when a child feels anxious or distressed about going to school. It's a situation that affects quite a few school-age children, somewhere between 1% to 2% (King and Bernstein, 2001; Elliot, 2007). There are suggestions that EBSA has increased since the pandemic with data showing a rise of children being persistently absent from school from 10.8% in 2018 to 19.5% in 2022 (DfE, 2022). Additionally, research has indicated that the pandemic has had a subsequent rise in mental health disorders and anxiety in children (Panda et al., 2021).

My PhD project has aimed to address the issue of rising EBSA through developing a brief parent-based intervention. It is supervised by Kathryn Lester and Daniel Michelson in Psychology. First, our research wanted to understand how school attendance problems have been affecting young children during Covid-19 and find ways to help. We talked to parents and educational

professionals in interviews and surveys to learn how EBSA was affecting primary-school children. We discovered that it was particularly difficult for students with special educational needs and those who already had anxiety problems.

We found several reasons why children were anxious about going to school during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. It included being worried about Covid-19, struggling with new school routines, not having good communication between home and school, and being concerned about catching up academically. Parents and professionals told us that the best support happens when schools and families work closely together. They suggested that we focus on early intervention, rebuilding the relationship between parents and schools, teaching parents about anxiety and how to help their child, and improving special education.

Based on this research, we held co-design workshops with parents and professionals in education and mental health. We aimed to create a new intervention for EBSA that would be low-cost and easy for parents to access, especially when they first notice their child's anxiety about attending school. The workshops had parents sharing their ideas and experiences. They talked about what the intervention should focus on, what materials and resources would help, how it should be delivered, who should deliver it, and how often. The stakeholders participated in activities aimed at answering these questions, which included brainstorming around a draft logic of change, discussing and completing a 'pros and cons' table about different ways to deliver the intervention (i.e. online or in-person format), contributing ideas in response to questions posed by the researcher and anonymously voting on different elements of the proposed intervention.

Using the input from these workshops, we developed the Intervention for School Anxiety and Avoidance (ISAAC) program. It has three online modules that parents can do on their own, with engaging materials, videos, and activities. The modules cover self-care strategies for parents, parenting strategies to help their child feel less anxious about school, and communication strategies to improve the relationship between home and school. We also included practical tasks for parents to complete and each module is followed by a coaching session.

Right now, we're testing the program with a small group of parents in Sussex. Ten parents signed up to the programme after it was shared with them by local Wellbeing and Inclusion Support services. These services had shared the programme with the parents as they believed the parents may benefit from some support for their child who was beginning to experience EBSA. So far, all the parents have started the programme and are going through the modules. After each module, I have coaching sessions with them. Once they finish the program, we'll interview them to get their thoughts and ideas about how feasible and helpful the program is. We're also measuring the program's effectiveness by looking at things like the child's overall anxiety, school-specific anxiety, parent stress, parent accommodations, and the quality of the parent-school relationship. We're also asking parents to tell us how many days their child has been absent from school in the last six weeks.

If you want more details about the earlier research stage, you can read the paper by [McDonald et al., 2022](#). We're currently writing up the process of developing the programme into a paper, but if you'd like to discuss it further, feel free to contact me (Brontë) at bm333@sussex.ac.uk.



Spotlight 2 on Emotional Lives

What does it mean for a child to be doing well? Exploring child wellbeing understandings in the context of social work services targeting refugee communities in Armenia

Rosalind Willi (Institute of Development Studies)

My research explores the wellbeing experiences of a group of children, young people and their families who have been displaced as a result of the Syrian war: Syrian-Armenians who have moved to their historic and imagined 'homeland' - Armenia. After having settled in various parts of Syria, roughly 100 years after the Armenian Genocide, an estimated 22,000 Syrian-Armenians have relocated to Armenia since 2011, of which 40-45% are estimated to be children below the age of 18. Numerous organisations are targeting these families, for example through family support services, many with an explicit interest in their wellbeing. Yet often the notion of "child wellbeing" is not explicitly defined, or its meaning(s) are not always shared by all participants.

While there have been singular studies on the situation of Syrian-Armenians in Armenia, the wellbeing experiences of children have largely remained unexplored in this context. This also speaks to the understudied experiences of children in transnational family mobilities, and how interventions can serve these families to improve wellbeing.

My PhD research is supervised by Dorte Thorsen (Institute of Development Studies) and Keetie Roelen (Open University). I was in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia for fieldwork between October 2021 and June 2022 and one of my research questions focuses on the various understandings around child wellbeing across children, members of their families, and actors in social support interventions. I used an array of different ethnographic visual and participatory child-centred methods with children, young people and their family members. This included activities based on drawing, photography, play and talking, with individuals or groups, which I adapted based on the preferences of the children and family members. I also interviewed social workers, psychologists and other professionals in the migration and child welfare fields, at grassroots, non- and governmental levels.

In my research I came to understand that there are a multitude of different ways 'doing well' or 'not doing well' (or well- and ill-being) can be understood, experienced and constructed in different contexts and situations. These are often also influenced by factors such as the age and gender of children, as well as the generation of adults and their personal and professional backgrounds. This variety of understandings around what 'child wellbeing' means, links strongly to moral ideas around what it means to be a 'good' child and a 'good' parent; in other words, what childhood means more broadly.

In this particular context, notions of childhood are shaped not only by historical factors such as norms surrounding children during Soviet times, and subsequent child welfare reforms following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also by various religious and social norms across different contexts – in this case Armenia and Syria. These factors intersect with ideas around belonging and identity of Syrian-Armenian children. In my research context many children had not even experienced the move from Syria or chose not to prioritise this aspect of their lives. For example, as can be seen in the pictures below, some of the children rather chose to concentrate their well- and illbeing ideas around family and school. In contrast, they were part of interventions that labelled them 'refugee' children.

Various understandings of child wellbeing come together in such interventions, meaning that children need to navigate different expectations towards them from various family members as well as professionals of formal institutions like their school and child welfare services. In my research I critically analyse the inherent assumptions around wellbeing, childhood and identity as well as explore how children negotiate belongings and identities in these often contradictory contexts.

Using 'wellbeing' as my primary research lens helped me have a more open look at the multi-faceted experiences of children, instead of focusing on their migrant status and categorising their lives into the state before, during, and after migration - as is often common in the international development context. It also enabled me to acknowledge experiences of adversity, but to not specifically focus on them, enabling a holistic view of experiences, capabilities and

aspirations of children, and how these change over time.

This research has taught me that child wellbeing interventions in development contexts could enhance their relevance and effectiveness based on deeper knowledge of the wellbeing expectations children are navigating in different social arenas of their lives.

A child not doing well...



"He lost his mother and father. They went somewhere, his mum and dad left but he stayed there." (10 year-old boy)

and doing well



"It's Christmas and they are opening gifts. With family and friends" (11 year-old girl)

A child not doing well...



"He can't play because he's studying. There are people outside, and he is watching it." (12 year-old boy)

and doing well



"I had a test at school, and I have a ten out of ten" (7-year-old-boy) "A-plus. So he got a really great grade and now he's like yaay!" (11 year-old girl)

Spotlight 3 on Emotional Lives

Reading feelings: Does reading fiction improve children's empathy and pro-social skills?

Su Morris, Jane Oakhill, Alan Garnham, and Robin Banerjee (Psychology)

Reading stories is a favourite pastime for many people. It's a way of being transported to far-flung places without leaving our sofa, or experiencing a challenging situation we hope we may never actually find ourselves in, or feeling the anticipation build until the final piece of the puzzle is revealed. Perhaps we read stories as we enjoy getting to know the cast of characters – a form of 'people-watching' through words. Some characters we may adore, while others we may loathe, but as readers we are in the privileged position of gaining a front-row seat view into the thoughts, actions, and reactions of all types of characters as each story unfolds. We can make predictions about what they might do or say, understand their choices, or share their emotional journey. Ultimately, reading allows us to create often complex people from a mere jumble of letters on a page. But what happens when we close the book on the final page? Have the characters completed their role in the story-telling and must now remain trapped in a paper-walled prison, or does their legacy live on in perhaps surprising ways? One possibility is that by understanding the thoughts and feelings of these fictional characters through reading stories, we can improve our own understanding of other people's thoughts and feelings in the real world as well. This is the subject of an exciting ESRC-funded project which is currently underway in the School of Psychology.

We are keen to find out whether there is a relationship between reading fiction and children's empathy, whether this changes over time, and whether reading fiction can be used to promote empathic responses. To answer these questions, we will carry out a longitudinal study where the same children complete the same activities at three different times, and intervention studies where children will complete a reading activity and we can assess how this affects their scores on an empathy task.

We have recently completed the first stage of our longitudinal study. 172 children in Year 4 (aged 8 to 9 years) completed a number of

reading activities, including a reading comprehension task, and questionnaires measuring their leisure reading habits, reading motivation, self-perception of their reading ability, and the extent to which they become fully immersed in the story (known as transportability). They also completed a questionnaire and activity to measure their ability to recognise other people's emotions and to share in that emotion (empathy), and various activities to measure their ability to recognise and understand characters' thoughts and actions (Theory of Mind; ToM). To help us understand how empathy and ToM link to helpfulness, kindness, and a propensity to share, children, their peers, and their teachers answered questions about their pro-social behaviour. The children will complete the activities again in the Autumn and Summer terms of Year 5, so that we can understand how the picture changes over time.

Our second study aims to understand the role that emotional texts, a focus on characters' emotions, and discussions about characters' emotions may have on promoting children's empathy. Hopefully, this will give us more specific insight into how reading fiction and empathy are related, and whether it might be possible to promote children's empathy and prosocial behaviour through reading fiction. Although reading is indisputably an important skill for children to master, this project focuses on the additional social and emotional benefits which could be gained

To that end, we are delighted to be working with Empathy Lab, an organisation which brings together an expert panel of academics, authors, and those who work in education, to promote children's empathy through reading. And why use reading to promote empathy? Well, as Cressida Cowell, successful children's author and former Children's Laureate once said: "Empathy is a vital skill, and books are the best, and most fun, way to learn it."

We couldn't agree more!

Spotlight 4 on Emotional Lives

Developing outcome measures for the Whole School Approach in Mental Health Support Teams

Emilia Robinson (Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust) with **Robin Banerjee** (Psychology), **Becca Randell** (ARC KSS and Academic Health Science Network), **Ian Macdonald** (Charlie Waller Trust), **Mary John** (Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and University of Surrey) and **Tanya Procter** (West Sussex County Council)

The Whole School Approach is a key function of Mental Health Support Teams in schools, which aims to encourage schools to develop and embed an approach that promotes positive emotional health and wellbeing. Mental Health Support Teams can work with schools and use their existing structures to create a co-ordinated approach that promotes emotional wellbeing, identifies those with emotional difficulties early on and provides the appropriate support to all who need it.

Our team's previous work on the Best Practice Review and Evaluation of Whole School Approaches to Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health within Mental Health Support Teams found that whilst there is a huge amount of work being put in place for the Whole School Approach, there were concerns about the lack of measures that were in place to evaluate the impact this work was having. Most Mental Health Support Teams and educational settings reported using measures for targeted work with individual pupils, but there was little or no strategic work reported that would systematically monitor and evaluate the impact of the Whole School Approach.

Therefore, one of the key recommendations in our previous Best Practice Review focused on the development of outcome measures to support whole school work.

In this new phase of our Whole School Approach project, we have developed an outcomes self-assessment tool to help educational settings monitor and assess the impact

of the approach on pupil and staff emotional wellbeing. This tool has been developed with the input of pupils, staff and Mental Health Support Teams in the South and South-East of England, as well as building on previous findings in the Best Practice Review.

We began the project by reaching out to Mental Health Support Teams in the South and South-East of England to understand what was in place already to assess the implementation of the Whole School Approach. Drawing upon detailed responses from 13 Mental Health Support Teams across these two regions, our audit revealed that there were no standardised tools in place to assess the Whole School Approach, particularly when it came to impact. Most of the tools focused on what was being done and how activities were being implemented, rather than the outcomes.

Following this, with consultation from our Steering Group and Mental Health Support Team colleagues, we conducted a co-production process to help develop an appropriate measurement approach. This co-production work aimed to seek the views of pupils and staff about what they felt was important to measure the impact of the Whole School Approach on emotional health and wellbeing. To do this, we created a pupil voice activity and a staff voice activity to capture their thoughts. A total of 274 pupils and staff members from schools across the region completed these activities, giving us a rich dataset.

Using the voices of staff and pupils, we then developed the Whole School Approach Outcomes Tool. The purpose of this tool is to allow educational settings to continually reflect on their approach and identify its impact. This can help inform their work in a targeted way and act as a springboard for discussions with stakeholders. From speaking with pupils and staff, we identified 12 key areas that were considered important in showing the impact of the Whole School Approach and embedded them into our tool as the main criteria to be considered. These criteria were designed to capture information about key outcomes associated with work that takes a Whole School Approach to mental health. To complete the tool, the educational setting must reflect on their work across 12 key criteria and give a self-rating for each one, and also assess the quality of evidence used to make these ratings.

We are now in our final stage of the project, whereby the newly-developed tool is being piloted across schools in the South, South East and North West of England. This pilot will allow school staff and Mental Health Support Teams to give feedback on the appropriateness of the tool and its feasibility in the school context. We will collate the feedback from this pilot via a survey and use it to finalise and improve the tool so that it is suitable for use. We will continue to work closely with schools, Mental Health Support Teams and colleagues from the Department of Education – all of whom are represented on our project steering group – to ensure this tool is adapted to make it as acceptable and accessible as possible, and then to distribute it as widely as possible for use in schools and Mental Health Support Teams.



Working with professionals and systems to support children, young people and families

A significant area of CIRCY members' work is focused around the development of services, systems and professional practices which have the aim of supporting marginalized and disadvantaged children young people and families. Within this section, we have included x spotlights, although there are also strong overlaps with several spotlights included in other sections. We begin with a spotlight on the doctoral research of Anna Hutchings (Social Work and Social Care) which is exploring considerations within female social workers'

practice with boys and young men who have engaged in sexually harmful behaviour. Louise Gazeley (Education) goes on to discuss her research into multi-agency working to improve the educational outcomes of children known to social care services. Finally, Ali Lacey, Gill Hampden-Thompson and Janet Boddy (Education) discuss their innovative approach to Qualitative Longitudinal Research within the national evaluation of A Better Start.

Spotlight 1 on Working with professionals and systems to support children, young people and families

Female Social Workers Working with Boys and Young Men Who Have Sexually Harmed

Anna Hutchings (Social Work and Social Care)

Social work in the UK is overwhelmingly a female profession, with nearly 9 in 10 children and family social workers being female (Department of Education, 2021). Alongside this, those who sexually harm are mostly male children and adults (Hackett, 2014). As such, most of the social work practice with boys and young men in respect of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) will be undertaken by female social workers. Yet, there is a lack of research exploring the potentially gendered nature of social work and HSB, and of how experiences and understandings of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation might be thought about and addressed in this context.

Under the supervision of Michelle Lefevre and Kristine Hickie, my doctoral research provides a qualitative exploration of how female social workers in the UK understand and navigate concepts such as gender, sexual orientation, and sexuality in their practice with boys and young men who have engaged in sexually harmful behaviour. Utilising interpretative phenomenological analysis as both a method and a methodology, I conducted interviews with 10 female social workers, comprising both specialists and non-specialists in the field of HSB. The objective was to examine potential divergences and congruences in their experiences of this sensitive and contested domain.

Like others, my progress on this research was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which compelled me to conduct my research activities via online platforms. Originally, I had intended to interview boys and young men themselves who have worked with female social workers in the context of HSB concerns. However, due to the limitations of online mediums, I did not feel I could offer proposed participants the necessary level of safety and post-interview support which could be achieved in-person. This left me with the dilemma of how to keep the experiences, perspectives and concerns of boys and young men central to my study. In addition to reviewing existing research undertaken with boys and young men in the context of HSB, my reflective research journal enabled me to reflect on insights gathered from my 15 years of experience as a female social worker predominantly working with boys and young men in the context of HSB. Such reflections on my 'insider role' has been central to my research project.

Despite this setback, I was determined to gain valuable insights from a practice-near context to complement the interviews conducted with female social workers. Through my professional contacts, I secured the opportunity to engage in a year-long, online ethnography of a mixed-sex group peer supervision. This supervision group comprised social workers and other professionals specialising in work with children and young people who have engaged in sexually harmful behaviour. Group supervision serves as a space for professionals to participate in reflective and collaborative learning with the aim of enhancing skills, knowledge and mutual support. I have been able to triangulate my fieldnotes from the observations with the interview data to consider whether how practitioners speak about their work at a distance corresponds to how it is spoken about in an embodied practice space, such as the supervision group.

The analysis of the collected data revealed a range of perspectives and experiences regarding the concepts of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation. These accounts emphasised the interdependent and context-dependent nature of these concepts, and how these qualities may be overlooked when considering their relevance to boys and young men who have sexual harmed. An important finding was that many social workers automatically assumed that a perpetrator of harmful sexual behaviours would be a boy or young man. This led some female social workers to adopt a "gender blind" approach in their understanding and handling of cases. Gender only became noticeable to some female social workers when the perpetrator deviated from the expected pattern and happened to be a girl or young woman. Furthermore, female social workers described actively assuming certain gendered roles to facilitate engagement and ensure their own psychological well-being in their professional practice.

To make sense of my findings, I am currently exploring theories related to gender and sexual scripts. These 'internalised scripts' refer to socially constructed expectations, norms, and roles associated with masculinity and femininity. They provide a framework for how individuals are expected to behave and express themselves and interact based on their gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation. This theoretical framework is helping me to interrogate the data from my female social workers and the group supervision observations. Currently, I am in the process of writing my thesis and plan to submit it by the end of 2023.

Spotlight 2 on Working with professionals and systems to support children, young people and families

Research into Multi-agency working to Improve the Educational Outcomes of Children Known to Social Care

Louise Gazeley (Education)

The research project Research into Multi-agency working to Improve the Educational Outcomes of Children Known to Social Care was a collaboration between the Centre for Teaching and Learning Research (CTLR) and The Centre for Innovation in Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY). It was commissioned by one Virtual School in England to inform its response to new duties placed on them by the Department for Education. These entail leading developments in local practices in order to improve the educational outcomes and future life chances experienced by children and young people (CYP) with a social worker (CWSW). The group includes CYP aged between 0-18 subject who have been subject to child protection plans (CPP) and/or identified as Children in Need (CIN) in the previous six years. Some may go on to become Children Looked After and a high proportion will be from low-income households. Throughout the research, the nature and scope of the Virtual School's extended remit was reflected in our use of a lighthouse metaphor. We also used the research as an opportunity to raise awareness of the Virtual School's extended remit and the forms of disadvantage associated with this group.

The research was conducted in three phases between September 2022 and January 2023. Research participants were all professionals working in education, social care or services working with education and/or social care. Participants were invited to share their experiences and reflections in interviews (individual and paired) and/or as part of multi-agency workshops.

As befits the nature of the project, members of the research team also brought experiences of education, social care and related services. They were: Louise Gazeley (CTLR Director), Tam Cane (Social Work), Julia Sutherland (Education), ESW Doctoral researchers



Hannah Olle and Greg Campbell, and Professor Michelle Lefevre (CIRCY Director). The research findings highlighted the complexity of the multi-agency context and a wide range of material and professional challenges. Nevertheless, the research team were able to identify a number of priorities and concrete approaches that could inform the future work of the Virtual School. It also led to the identification of three fundamental principles for practice:

- Close and empathetic understanding of CYP and families known to social care
- Personalised, flexible and holistic responses, suited to local contexts
- Scaffolding of progress and change over time, leading towards the achievement of appropriate milestones

Members of the team will be presenting their findings at the Social Policy Conference in Nottingham in July and at a Research & Practice event hosted by the CTLR School exclusions and Alternative Provision (SEAP) Network in July.

For more information about the research please contact project lead Dr Louise Gazeley: lhg20@sussex.ac.uk.

Spotlight 3 on Working with professionals and systems to support children, young people and families

An innovative approach to Qualitative Longitudinal Research within the national evaluation of A Better Start (ABS)

Ali Lacey, Gill Hampden-Thompson and Janet Boddy (Education)

A Better Start is a ten-year programme funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. The programme aims to improve the life chances of children aged 0-4 years by funding local partnerships in five areas across England and testing new ways of making support and services for families stronger. All five programme areas have common priorities in terms of core outcome domains (children's diet and nutrition, language and communication, and social and emotional skills; and local systems change). But the model is designed to recognise that one size does not fit all: each participating area develops a locally embedded, place-based approach, with a strong emphasis on working in partnership with parents and local communities.

The national evaluation of A Better Start is being led by NatCen Social Research and involves partners from Research in Practice, the National Children's Bureau, and RSM Partners, alongside the team from the University of Sussex, which includes Ali Lacey, Gill Hampden-Thompson, Janet Boddy, and Rebecca Webb (Education and Social Work); Kate Lester and Robin Banerjee (Psychology); and Harm van Wijk (BSMS). Using a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, the evaluation will build a mosaic of evidence across four evaluation objectives to determine the effectiveness of the approach.

As part of this mosaic of evidence, Sussex members are leading on an innovative approach to qualitative longitudinal evaluation

using creative and participatory methods to understand how A Better Start fits within the big picture of complex and diverse family lives over time. We are working in-depth, following 25 families over four years. This comprises 12 families with a child aged 0-12 months and 13 with a child aged 24-36 months. These families – five in each participating area – provide a sample that is emblematic (rather than statistically representative) of the diversity of families involved with the programme. Families in the study vary in characteristics including family size and structure, ethnicity, home languages, and in terms of their level of involvement with local provision.

Over four years, we are conducting in-person interviews with families at home once a year, followed by a telephone catch-up six months later. Interviews are centred on the primary caregiver, but anyone in the family who is present can take part. Participatory activities – map-making and photography – are designed to enable young children to take part, if they want to, so their contributions help to shape learning from the evaluation from an early age.

We have recently completed the first year's data collection and are currently arranging to visit families for the second time later this summer. Looking back over what we have learned over the past year, and as we embark on another wave of data collection, it is clear that our methodological approach has contributed something unique and exciting to the mosaic of evidence in the wider evaluation.

The research with families shows that many are living with complex and often challenging circumstances. In this context, it is striking that parents and carers value an adaptive, inclusive and empowering approach, with provision that facilitates their aspirations for their parenting and for their children. Affordability was particularly significant for families living with financial insecurity, enabling access to activities and to resources such as books or affordable fruit and vegetables that they would otherwise struggle to afford. You can read more about our findings – and about the other components of the evaluation – in the first annual report for the national evaluation of A Better Start.

Increasingly, researchers recognise the necessity of multi-faceted designs, incorporating qualitative methodologies, for evaluating multi-faceted and programmatic interventions into complex and dynamic family lives, situated within contexts that are themselves complex and dynamic (e.g., Greenhalgh and Papoutsi 2018; Neale, 2021; Boddy 2023). The national evaluation of A Better Start provides an important example of the ways in which creative qualitative and longitudinal approaches, embedded within a mosaic of evidence, can illuminate the ‘black box’ of complex causality.

A family-friendly approach requires ‘rigorous flexibility’ – adapting as appropriate to each interview (for example, in the timing and formation of questions, depending on who is involved and how they want to contribute). It is also inherently unpredictable; while we have an interview topic guide, families steer the conversation through their decisions about what to mark on the map, or which photographs to take or to share in the interview. This participatory ethos is integral to ethical engagement with families, but it has also facilitated conversations and insights that would be difficult to imagine in any other context.

The photograph below, taken by a child from the window of their family’s flat (the pixellated appearance is a result of the child playing with the zoom function) exemplifies how the method enables children to shape the narrative in family interviews. This photo, showing the local park, prompted a conversation involving the children and their mother about outside space, and the importance of outdoor activities – including those through A Better Start – for the whole family, as places to exercise, play, socialise, and relax.



Boddy, J. (2023) Engaging with uncertainty: studying child and family welfare in precarious times. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 12, 1, 127-141. [Open access](#)

Spotlighting the Innovate Project

The [Innovate Project](#), led by **Michelle Lefevre** (Social Work and Social Care), is now in its fourth and final year. This multi-strand four-year study is in collaboration with the University of Durham, the charity Research in Practice, and the social enterprise Innovation Unit. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, it is exploring innovation in social care services to address extra-familial risks and harms experienced by young people, such as child exploitation and serious youth violence. As well as developing new knowledge about the processes of innovation, the project is exploring three new frameworks used within local authorities, third sector organisations, and interagency safeguarding networks as a basis for innovation: Trauma-informed Practice, Transitional Safeguarding and Contextual Safeguarding.

In this section, we're spotlighting three aspects of the project this year written by colleagues in Social Work and Social Care: how professionals situate and respond to parents when extra familial risks and harms emerge (Roni Eyal-Lubling); exploring innovation trajectories through 'journey mapping' (Nathalie Huegler and colleagues); and emergent learning about implementing Contextual Safeguarding (Michelle Lefevre). If you want to know more about the project, [our website](#) is full of information, [forthcoming events](#), and a [range of resources](#). You can sign up for updates by emailing info@theinnovateproject.co.uk.



Spotlight 1 on the Innovate Project

Parents' role in supporting young people experiencing extra familial risks and harms

Roni Eyal-Lubling (Social Work and Social Care)

The fairly recent conceptualization of the term 'extra-familial risks and harms' in UK policy and practice has spurred a re-shuffling of professional understandings of the places in which risk and harm are experienced by young people, who might be responsible, and how services might best respond to them. Most importantly it has refocused the professional safeguarding gaze from focusing solely on parents as the source of risk and harm, towards the role played by other social contexts and relationships as potential spaces where young people may encounter harmful situations where they are victimised and/or become involved in criminality.

This trend of thought has developed alongside other efforts by child protection practitioners and scholars (Featherstone et al, 2018) to innovate parent-inclusive safeguarding models and practices which take parent voices and perspectives into account, and may even be led by parents with lived experience of the child protection system. While at face-value professionals may buy in to these new ways of thinking, they also pose an epistemological challenge to those professionals who have traditionally been trained to think of parents as being the source of harm, e.g. as they are with intrafamilial abuse and neglect (Firmin, 2016).

Additionally, professionals are influenced by a broader public climate that locates young people's exposure to harms beyond the home as their parents' responsibility, occurring through a perceived failure on parents' part to sufficiently protect or control their children (Hallett, 2017). In both respects, parents have described conventional safeguarding systems having taken what might be considered a stance towards them that is less than supportive, even punitive (Scott et al, 2017).

It was these issues that we wanted to explore as part of the Innovate Project. Specifically, as part of my research in the strand of the project looking at 'Trauma-informed-Practice', I wanted to understand how these conceptualizations fed into professionals' construction of the parental role in their children's risk and support trajectories.

their children's risk and support trajectories. The project's research methodology included a number of ethnographic observations of on-line multi-agency panel meetings in two case study sites – one a local authority in Scotland and the other a voluntary sector organisation in England. In each meeting, a range of professionals (including from children's social care, the police, health, education, and youth justice) met together to review a young person's situation, considering risks and welfare needs, and developing protection plans.

Our analysis sought to identify and consider instances of the following: how professionals were collaborating with parents in thinking of ways to respond to extra-familial risks and harms; how parents were spoken about by professionals (identifying discourses); and what role parents seem to hold, or were being accorded, in their children's support and safeguarding trajectories.

What I found was that the interagency 'talk' about parents was organized on a continuum between traditional and more innovative relationships between professionals and parents/carers of young people experiencing risks and harms beyond the home. These relations seemed to correspond with the degree to which each site had managed to implement and embed the key principles of Trauma informed Practice. A taxonomy of five categories was identified:

1. **Absent parents** – those who seemed not to be involved in safety planning, or were not spoken about in the panel meetings
2. **Responsibilised/blamed parents** – parents who were seen as responsible for their child's exposure to harm and, rather paradoxically, given the main responsibility for managing protection
3. **Instrumental/objectified parents** – those who were seen in rather instrumental ways, as primarily a means to gather information about young people, not as whole persons themselves
4. **Parents as meriting support themselves** – those parents' whose own hardship and vulnerabilities were validated and where supports were offered
5. **Parents as collaborators** – seen as equal partners in safeguarding

At this stage, we plan to present these findings to parents at PACE – an organisation that supports parents to safeguard their children from exploitation occurring outside the home. As part of this knowledge exchange meeting, we are interested to find out: how do the findings resonate with their own experiences with social care services; do they reflect a Trauma-Informed approach and general principles of good practice; and are they useful for addressing extra-familial risks and harms? Also, we will invite parents to feed in any perspectives or issues that were not found in our study.

Following this engagement meeting, we plan to develop resources based on the conversations with [PACE](#) parents that would be youth and parent/carer friendly and would help practitioners support both young people and their parents/carers.

Spotlight 2 on the Innovate Project

Using Journey Mapping conversations to reflect with professionals on social care innovations

Nathalie Huegler, Gillian Ruch and Jeri Damman (Social Work and Social Care) with **Susannah Bowyer** (Research in Practice)

[Transitional Safeguarding](#) is the most recently [emerging concept](#) within the Innovate Project's research, seeking to disrupt the binary framing of child and adult safeguarding systems as well as the boundaries between siloed services and organisations in a local area. It advocates for 'whole system' level change, emphasising the need for systemic connections, relationships and co-production with young people and their communities. Transitional Safeguarding is explicitly not defined as a model, but rather a framework intended to be adapted in context, based on local evidence and in line with a number of key principles (e.g. ecological, contextual, developmental and relational perspectives as well as attention to issues of diversity, equality and inclusion). While Transitional Safeguarding can be seen as wide-reaching and comprehensive in its conceptualisation, current contexts for realising transformational change are highly constraining, with existing difficulties (such as lack of funding and resources in social care services, particularly for adults) exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

From the outset of our research, we have found that professionals leading local innovation endeavours had few illusions about the long-term nature of required change – even though this did not prevent them from hoping for some more easily achievable 'quick wins'. Many of the challenges that make Transitional Safeguarding development complex lie in the very characteristics of the change it seeks to effect: creating more integrated local systems is challenging because responses to extra-familial risks and harms around the age of 18

(and too often, before) tend to shift from a focus on safeguarding young people's wellbeing to an often disparate and confusing array of organisations dealing with issues in relative isolation. As we explore in a forthcoming Innovate Project [book on innovation in social care](#), a [complexity science lens](#) helps us recognise the dispersed and distributed nature of control and power in local systems, as well as the recursive character (e.g. a 'one step forward - two steps back' dynamic) of innovation processes.

While it may be tempting to judge innovation endeavours by tangible outcomes of change produced within a given timescale (e.g. over the limited duration of a project), our research highlights the value of capturing their dynamic processes in a more nuanced way. For this purpose, we have conducted a number of 'journey mapping' conversations with professionals leading Transitional Safeguarding innovations in different local areas (including and beyond our main project sites), informed by the [psychosocial perspectives](#) that are central to our research approach. We have used virtual 'whiteboard' visualisations (see an illustrative example below) to capture and map key points across different domains, including the feelings which professionals associate with different parts and events along their local areas' innovation journeys. This technique has also allowed us to reflect with professionals about their sense of young people's involvement in these processes.

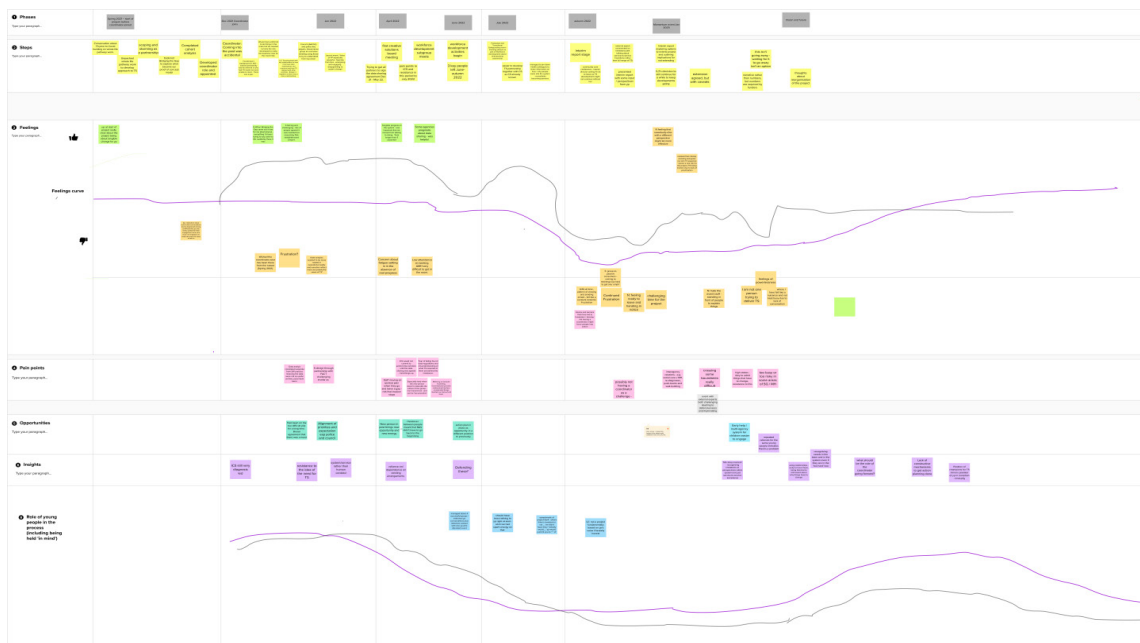
While some areas succeeded in prioritising young people’s direct participation, this has been a challenge more broadly, as we wrote in last year’s report. Nevertheless, young people have informed perspectives more indirectly, with professionals recalling how their work with a particular young person often illustrated the need for change (or the small ‘wins’ along the way) in very tangible ways.

Using the journey mapping conversations as a technique has uncovered the professional – and sometimes also deeply personal – narratives that can so easily get lost in the every-day busy-ness that underlies both safe

guarding practice with young people and the practice of seeking to effect systemic change through innovations such as Transitional Safeguarding. One of our research partners reflected on the journey mapping conversation as follows:

“I think in some ways it’s been quite cathartic. I think it’s been ... [...] good to have a kind of facilitated, undisturbed time for reflection, because [you] just ... never do, just don’t make time to do it, have time to do it. And in that space, just in terms of thinking through [aspects of the journey] [...] [you realise:] ‘actually that’s really interesting, I’d forgotten about that, and it was significant’...”

[Local area Innovation Lead].



An illustrative example of a Transitional Safeguarding ‘journey map’ virtual whiteboard visualisation

Spotlight 3 on the Innovate Project

Tailoring Contextual Safeguarding systems to meet local conditions

Michelle Lefevre (Social Work and Social Care) with **Jenny Lloyd** (Durham University)

Our developing insights from the Innovate Project case study sites into the conditions needed for the implementation of [Contextual Safeguarding](#) has dovetailed iteratively over the past four years with learning at Sussex from our evaluation of the [piloting](#) and embedding of Contextual Safeguarding within the London Borough of Hackney, and ongoing learning at Durham University from [other trial sites](#). Indeed it was the collaborative work in Hackney which first led to the Innovate Project partnership with Carlene Firmin, the originator of the approach, and her Durham colleagues, Jenny Lloyd, Rachael Owens and Delphine Peace.

In essence, Contextual Safeguarding offers a framework upon which to base new practice systems which (it is hoped) will be more efficient and effective in responding to extra-familial risks and harms than conventional safeguarding systems. The approach seeks to address the ecological nature of harm by working with, and in, contexts beyond the home – such as schools, with friendship groups, and in locations where young people spend time. A central feature is that Contextual Safeguarding does not offer a manual or template which should be implemented with fidelity to achieve particular outcomes. Instead it offers a conceptual framework and set of principles which require interpretation, and sensitive and nuanced innovation tailored to a particular context. This means that every site looks somewhat different, as leaders and stakeholders experiment with how to configure roles, responsibilities, tools and IT systems to reflect the needs and governance of the local area.

The Innovate Project has offered space for us to step back from this range of test sites to consider together the factors and processes

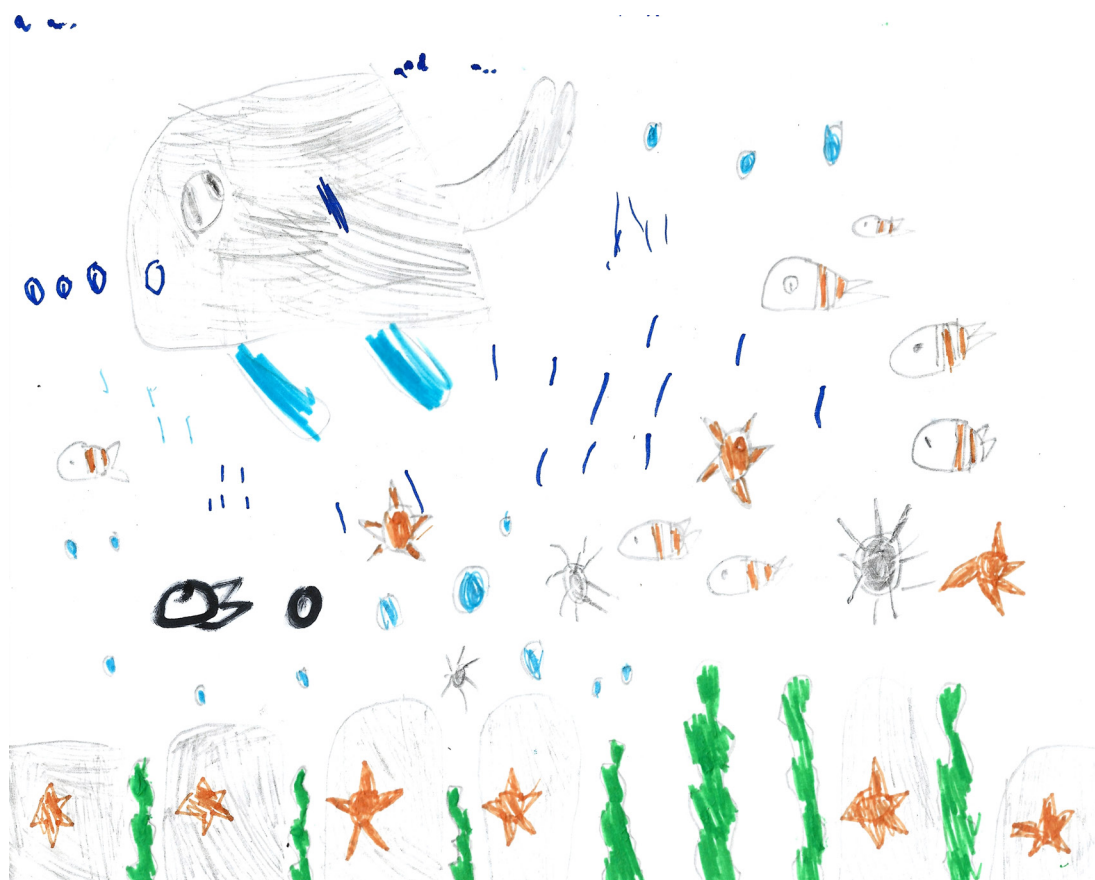
which commonly facilitate or challenge the development of a well-functioning and effective Contextual Safeguarding system, and the implications for innovation practice within the social care sector.

First, it needs to be noted that a radical innovation such as Contextual Safeguarding does not offer a quick fix. It requires co-production with local stakeholders, well-established partnership arrangements, a transformation of existing IT systems and practice tools, and significant cultural change, supported by an ongoing package of training. This takes considerable time and effort and can be disruptive. Sites need to consider how they will maintain their ‘business as usual’ and not be distracted from ongoing statutory safeguarding responsibilities.

Second, relatedly, addressing risks in the contexts themselves within which harm occurs is an addition, not an alternative, to working individually with young people at significant risk and their families. Work within contexts might involve delivering preventative programmes in schools or working to create safety plans with groups of young people. New skills have to be learned which are not currently standard within social work education and local areas have to determine whether responsibility for this work should be located with a small group of individuals who become highly skilled, or held across the children’s social care workforce. Both options incur potential challenge in terms of the diffusion of expertise and how this additional work should be resourced. Questions have arisen for our research sites as to how best establish a configuration over time which balances aspirations for more effective practice with realism about the financial viability of the new approach.

Contextual Safeguarding, then, involves doing more than the standard and, so, is not a cheap option. Building a case for harnessing additional ring-fenced resources for this additional work is always easier when 'value for money' can be demonstrated. A more expensive service can be considered cost-effective if it is associated with improved wellbeing and safety outcomes for young people and their families and improved safety within contexts. As yet, improved outcomes cannot yet be unambiguously distinguished in the research data. Our evaluation of the second stage of the Hackney pilot notes that this does not appear to be related to the promise that

Contextual Safeguarding offers, nor any lack of effort or vision on the part of that pilot site, but rather that innovation (particularly radical, transformative innovation) takes a long time and commonly involves several recursive system design loops which reflect ongoing action learning. Unless and until final system configurations emerge, which are robust and resilient to change, evaluators cannot be confident that any observed effects in the data are the intended consequences of the Contextual Safeguarding approach. This is the next challenge for the journey of Contextual Safeguarding and we look forward to our continuing contributions to this learning.



Digital Lives

This theme explores the implications of the digital revolution for childhood and youth, examining many dimensions of digital childhoods including the ways that technology impacts on parenting and play as well as the role of the digital in personal and professional boundaries in work with children and young people, confounding age and generation based hierarchies. Through CIRCY's collaboration with the Sussex Humanities Lab, we seek to promote young people as entrepreneurs of digital landscapes, contributing to debates on data sharing, ownership and access as well as curators of archives and memories. In the first of our spotlights in this section, Evelyn Keryova, a doctoral researcher in Social Work and Social Care, who describes the use of vlogging as a methodological tool.

Our research also engages with how children and young people may potentially be understood as having economic value within a digital economy and how participation may be associated with exploitation as well as the consequences of quantification as their educational performance and consumption practices are mapped, measured and monitored. The second spotlight in this section, by Lisa Holmes and Jeongeun Park (Education), considers the use of secondary data analysis to facilitate a longitudinal digital perspective on young people's lives and experiences.

Spotlight 1 on Digital lives

Vlogging as a tool for becoming an insider

Evelyn Polacek Kery (Social Work and Social Care)

My research on the critical thinking of young people, aged 12-14, who watch YouTube videos, used a mixed methods approach. Online surveys and interviews with parents and their children were followed by an online focus group with young people. YouTube is a social media platform and whether you are watching or creating content, it is all about the videos. And that is why from the very first moment I knew that video would play a massive part in my methodology. There was no other way to immerse myself in the vlogging (video blogging) culture, than by creating a video myself. This part of the methodology resonated with me the most, because it was something different, creative and hands-on.

In previous research, academics have focused mostly on video as a tool for analysis, but there are more opportunities for using vlogging in mixed methods research. I used

the vlog during the focus group as a tool for starting a conversation about important themes that emerged from this research – authenticity, participation, advertising and production of videos. I was able to immerse myself into the vlogging culture, which allowed me to better understand the positives and negatives of 'putting yourself out there'.

Research with young people is often considered to be high-risk research and it was no different for me. However, this method allowed me to avoid potential ethical issues that could have emerged from using any already published videos on YouTube. Because I created the content, I was in control of what is said and shown and, by using privacy settings on YouTube, I was able to help participants avoid potential harm from seeing suggested videos or inappropriate content.

Yellow Food Challenge, as I called the video, was a 17-minute-long vlog which I created over some period of time, uploaded it on YouTube as a private video and shared it with the group of young people during the online focus group. In this video, I pretended to eat yellow foods for 24-hours, I walked throughout streets of London, played a video game and talked about my usual day. I deliberately lied about many things in the video, as I tried to highlight issues that we as adults often see when we watch videos on YouTube or when we think about how these matters might affect young people. I wanted to see what young people would notice and if they even cared about the same things that adults might care about. But of course, I was very surprised by the results, especially when it emerged that that young people did not notice me changing the time on the clock behind me.

However, what they did care about was my un-authentic appearance. Authenticity is considered to be one of the most important aspects of vlogging. It establishes trust and credibility and fosters genuine connections with the viewers. When YouTube influencers present themselves honestly and share their true experiences, opinions and emotions, viewers are most likely to engage with them and their channel and connect with them on a deeper level. I was unfortunately unable to create an authentic image, not because I lied, but because my voice, appearance and day-to-day activities were described by young people as unnatural and acted. They were right, because I was in an uncomfortable position in front of the camera and my articulation and gestures were reflected in how I felt. Although, I hoped the video will start a discussion about how I am not an influencer and how it is obvious that OddBox did not send me their box of wonky fruit and vegetables as part of the press release package, the conversation with young people was mostly about how important it is to be authentic.

Most importantly, by using vlogs as part of the methodology, I was able to immerse myself into the vlogging culture. During the interview stage, young people shared with me that they do not post videos on YouTube because they are scared of the potential response from their friends, family and online community. I suddenly knew what they meant by it. I reflected on this in my PhD diary, where I specifically wrote that I felt embarrassed and I could not watch them watching me. When I shared the video, I had to leave my room for a couple of minutes, as I was not able to look at the version of myself in the vlog. My cheeks went suddenly all red from being ashamed and I was very scared of young people's response. This was central to my research because I finally understood how they felt about the idea of sharing videos online.

Using vlogs as part of my mixed method research was not just to prompt a conversation, but it was an important part of my integration into young people's online world. It allowed me to understand them, be part of their culture and put myself into the same position as they are in. It also allowed me to show them my vulnerabilities – but I felt weirdly supported and accepted by young people.



Screenshot from the Yellow Food Challenge vlog: me starting the day and brushing my teeth, walking through Lush at the Oxford Street and my local Tesco, picking yellow foods and explaining what I am going to eat during the day and playing a video game unpacking.

Spotlight 2 on Digital lives

A Mixed Methods Approach to Better Understand the Lives of Care-Experienced Young People: Insights from the Ongoing ReThink Project

Jeongeun Park and Lisa Holmes (Education)

Secondary data analysis (SDA), where it re-purposes data collected from third parties, is critical to provide insights into complex systems and populations of interest, especially due to its capacity to facilitate a longitudinal perspective. Whilst there are increasing voices of incorporating SDA with other research methods in social sciences, we feel that SDA is often underutilised in mixed methods studies. The ReThink project, which Lisa and I are part of, pushes the boundaries of knowledge of mental health and outcomes of care-experienced young people by integrating SDA with primary quantitative data collection and qualitative interviews.

ReThink is a four-year interdisciplinary research programme funded by the UK's Medical Research Council and is led by Lisa and Rachel Hiller (UCL). The team comprises academics from the universities of Sussex, UCL, Cardiff, Oxford, and Bristol and includes Coram Voice and Adoption UK as non-academic partners. Rethink seeks to understand the main factors that drive mental health and well-being in care-experienced young people at two key transition points: the move from primary to secondary school and into early adulthood.

Under the broad realm of mixed methods, Lisa and I mainly conduct the longitudinal secondary analysis of national administrative data in England. The data is accessed by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Secure Research Service and for ReThink our analysis utilises a linked dataset comprising looked-after-children data (SSDA903), the National Pupil Database (NPD), and Individual

Learner Records (ILR). Our longitudinal analysis covers a 13-year period that encompasses middle/late childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. By utilising this data, we aim to enhance an understanding of the link between out-of-home care history and mental health, educational and employment outcomes at the two transition periods (moving from primary to secondary schooling and moving into early adulthood). Our analysis will be particularly useful as we use large-scale administrative data which allow us to draw on care service and education records and academic performance rather than relying on self-reported measures. Findings from our SDA will be combined with those from primary data collection, as mentioned above, to further unpack psychological mechanisms leading to transition outcomes as well as lived experiences of this group.

Whilst each method has its own strengths, using each one alone can provide an incomplete picture of the complex phenomenon of transition outcomes, which has been at the centre of academic and policy interest in children's social care. Stand-alone SDA is no doubt beneficial and cost-effective to inform theory and social policy by using ready-to-use population-level data without having to wait to collect and collate high-quality longitudinal primary data. Nevertheless, SDA is not a panacea for studying the lives of care-experienced young people. This approach may be undermined to grasp underlying processes and nuances of their lived experiences and put their voices at the centre of our research. In addition, our secondary data may be less reflective of the imminent social context such as the COVID-19 pandemic because of the

timing of data collection. At the same time, without a good comprehensive understanding of how this group fares under the current out-of-home care and educational system over time, our research may be less impactful to understand the general youth development of this group and critique the status quo. This, in turn, can be a pivotal starting point to justify the reshaping of macro-level social care policy and practice at a population level.

Taking both sides into account, we attempt not to treat SDA, primary quantitative and qualitative (or creative) methods as incompatible but combine them in a mindful and innovative way. We know that this research project will not be quick and easy. However, this will equip us with a better tool to study the complexity of the lives of care-experienced young people and promote evidence-based but also youth-centred policy and practice.



Imaginative Methodologies

Over the past decade, CIRCY has built an international reputation for methodological excellence, engaging in international advisory work and collaborations. CIRCY has also provided a critical space in which to interrogate the meanings of methodological innovation and creativity across disciplines. Central to our work is the pursuit of imaginative methodologies – sometimes the search for new, innovative approaches, sometimes the reimagining and repurposing of traditional methods – which underpins our fundamental concern with keeping the child or young person at the centre of our thinking. Regardless of discipline, our methodological approach depends on how we conceive of the child, and we challenge CIRCY researchers to imagine alternatives to reductive, static or objectifying lenses on childhood and youth. In this way, our emphasis on imaginative methodologies provides a distinctive conceptual space that connects our expertise in temporal research methods, in participatory approaches, in research ethics, in cross-national methodology, and in creative, digital, sensual and psychosocial approaches.

We have included four spotlights in this final thematic section. Rebecca Webb and Perpetua Kirby (Education) look back over their creative methodological work from the past five years within their TRANSFORM-iN EDUCATION projects. Kathleen Bailey (Social Work and Social Care) discusses how observing a child who finds a worm and makes him a ‘home’ led to a diffractive analysis that was central to her doctoral research. Kristi Hickie (Social Work and Social Care) explores her use of participatory visual arts methods to explore resistance, self-preservation and self-care among young survivors of sexual violence. Finally Tessa Lewin (Institute of Development Studies) explores a methodology of dialogues for rejuvenating rights for girls and young women

Spotlight 1 on Imaginative Methodologies

Creating with uncertainty: TRANSFORM-IN EDUCATION five years on

Rebecca Webb and Perpetua Kirby (Education)

'We relate, know, think, world, and tell stories through and with other stories, worlds, knowledge, thinkings, yearnings. . . Critters—human and not—become with other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding.'
(Donna J. Haraway, 2016, *Staying with the Trouble: Making kin in the Cthulucene*, p. 97)

As we write, we anticipate young and old bodies in the central Brighton library engaging deeply with a compost pile replete with fungi, bacteria and wiggly worms. They will touch, smell and listen with advanced acoustic technology, as well as feed the compost with organic matter. This will be part of an exhibition that marks the culmination of a current collaboration with local schools, which itself is layered upon and interwoven with five years of [TRANSFORM-IN EDUCATION](#) projects.

All this work is threaded with a concern with the practical philosophical question about the purpose of education within a democracy that requires a healthy ongoing organic making and remaking of the world (what Haraway above calls 'earthly worlding and unworlding'). This is about growing education for a civil society that is able to sit-with and respond-to the complexities and uncertainties of the big issues of our time. Beyond learning pre-existing knowledge and skills, and being socialised into 'business-as-usual' ways of being and doing, it is also concerned with how education can allow threads to diffuse into new places in unforeseen ways.

The work is premised on a phrase of Haraway's that we have come to love, which is that 'beings render each other capable in encounters'. It is this idea of relational encounters, in this case with compost, that we call 'uncertain pedagogies'. The point is to be open to what is encountered and what it is the other (be it compost, 'critters' or people) is asking of each of us. This goes far beyond the importance of knowing facts about compost contributing to biodiversity and mitigating climate change, in which it then becomes an object of our learning. Rather the invitation is to be open to that which is curious, unexpected or surprising, and how we are each distinctively called to respond in ways that might not otherwise have been possible or imagined.

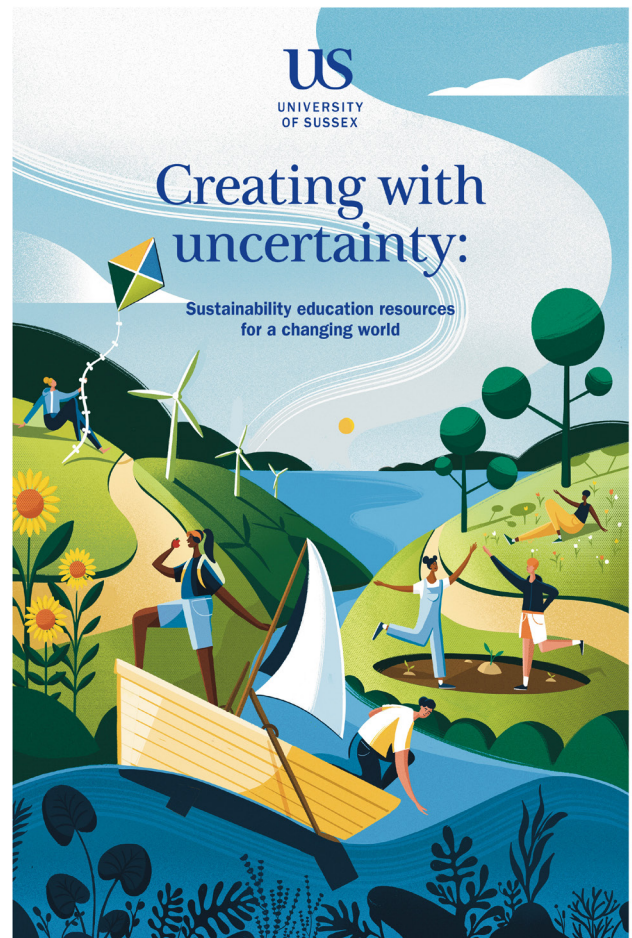
We research and explore this uncertain pedagogic approach with teachers and students of all ages, in a wide variety of educational contexts. For several years now, the specific focus of this work has been on sustainability education. This has involved a deep interdisciplinary mulching through working with colleagues across the University of Sussex, and with external partners, who have a range of sustainability expertise and knowledge.

We apply a practical philosophical 'not knowing' to what we do, in which we support students and teachers to attend closely, dig deeply and engage with the entangled rhizomatic strands of climate change and biodiversity loss in our everyday lives. The emphasis is on how we might live differently with other humans and nonhumans, through exploring the many uncertainties about how to set about this and what might happen.

The fermentation of our different collaborations over the five years has resulted in a new Open Access publication has been published by the University of Sussex Library and hosted on PressBooks, entitled [Creating with uncertainty: sustainable education resources for a changing world](#), together with accompanying films. These provide resources that are adaptable for students of all ages, to engage them philosophically and practically to work towards a more sustainable world. It includes ten on-the-ground sustainability topics, each offering different activities to enrich teaching across the curriculum. They are designed to be flexibly adapted to sit alongside and complement other curricular content; equally they lend themselves to informal education contexts where no there is no pre-existing curricula. The resource also includes activities for students to do at home with their families. As with the exhibition, the aim is to provoke public imaginaries of existing everyday existential climate change realities and to invite responses for action.

The exhibition, at central Brighton's Jubilee Library on 17th to 23rd July, is being co-curated with our partner organisation, [Our City, Our World](#), which is the Brighton and Hove Climate Change, Sustainability and Environmental Education Programme

The resource and exhibition build on work supported and funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF), the Sussex Sustainability Research Programme ([SSRP](#)), and the [PASTRES](#) programme (Pastoralism, Uncertainty and Resilience: Global Lessons from the Margins).



Spotlight 2 on Imaginative Methodologies

‘George killed the worm’ - a chapter within a ‘diffractive analysis’

Kathleen Bailey (Social Work and Social Care)

This is George and ‘the worm’ during my doctoral research fieldwork. These visual images capture one incident or intra-action in which George finds a worm and makes him a ‘home’. Yet my audio recordings of the entire art session in which this took place reveal multiple intra-actions involving George and worms. Writing a book chapter using this data formed part of an overall diffractive analysis that unravelled phenomena that related to my research focus (Barad, 2007).

To provide some context, my research is underpinned by the notion that nature is a socially constructed phenomenon and that children’s own ideas on nature are still emerging and differ from adult normative constructions. I further contend that sustainability is an ideology that focuses on preserving a certain kind of nature for an unknown future, as it struggles to compete with concurrent capitalist economy ideologies. Thus, my research focuses on how children’s emerging constructions of ‘nature’ are affected by and are conducive or not to sustainability. Thus, I figured by engaging in art activities with young children in an outdoor environment, by being involved with them, and observing their concomitant play, I might discover something about the way in which children construct nature whilst simultaneously being subject to these and other structural influences.



Analytically my understanding of diffraction derives from Karen Barad’s (2007) book ‘Meeting the Universe Halfway – quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning’. Barad (2007) suggests that our intra-action with the world creates diffraction. Whilst a reflective epistemology may look at what is there or mirrored back, diffraction seeks to understand what is, and also what isn’t, created or comes to be known, or to matter (Barad, 2007). Therefore, when bodies, entities or agencies intra-act, they create diffractive waves which come to cross paths with other intra-active waves, and thus phenomena or possibilities for what might come to be known, or matter lies at these wave inter-sections. Thus, I set out to read the diffractive patterns by tracing the way George’s intra-actions affected the worms, the children, myself, and the world, and how the world affected us back.

To analyse the diffractive patterns ensuing from George and the worms, I drew on Van Dooren’s (2016, p. 8) notion of writing a “lively story” as a method to draw attention to the predicaments of endangered species by bringing them ‘alive’ on the page. To help me structure my ‘lively story’ I created a storyboard (below) so as to: combine my visual and audio data; hold them in one place simultaneously; gaze upon them and wonder. In this way I was able to engage with my knowledge of pedagogical and philosophical theories so that I might uncover the points where the waves met, jotting down my thoughts upon the storyboard. Transforming the storyboard into a linear form resulted in the text that I utilised in my chapter advocating ‘nature’ as an effective Early Years pedagogy. Once written, the chapter passed to the book editors, to be filtered through their own ontological and epistemological lenses, before being returned to me for revision. Whilst criticism may require some emotional fortitude, engaging with the editors’ recommendations proved productive, as it revealed a further distinct phenomena which I have come to call ‘interspecies justice’.



The story of ‘George killed the worm’ weaves theoretical analysis between sections of audio transcript so as to highlight how the “interactions, between myself, the children, the worm and George, played out roles within a community that seem to fit notions of judge and jury, the police, the ‘victim’ (worm) and the individual (George) who we seek to bring into line with an unarticulated moral code or law” that states that worms must not be killed (Bailey, 2023, p. 75). The story also suggests that “George’s fascination with worms and his ability to adapt [to his social and material milieu] are prompted by a desire to be more like children in this group who care for worms, and are subsequently praised by me for their good conforming conduct” (Bailey, 2023, p. 81). This single research story suggests to me that children do not just construct nature with those around them (including other species), but politically engage in the construction of ethical codes such as ‘interspecies

justice’. Yet equally, structures, such as those that inform Early Years practice and modern judicial systems, play a part in shaping the kinds of nature children create. Whether these emerging constructions are conducive to young children’s capacity to embrace an ideology of sustainability now and in the future can only be uncertain. Diffractively the moral of the story is, that diffraction is never over and can always be reread once new waves interfere in the unravelling.

References

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Spotlight 3 on Imaginative Methodologies

Imagining Resistance: using participatory visual arts methods to explore resistance, self-preservation and self-care among young survivors of sexual violence

Kristi Hickie (Social Work and Social Care) with **Camille Warrington** (University of Bedfordshire) and **Becky Warnock** (University of the Arts London)

The word ‘resistance’ is polysemous (has multiple meanings); it has been adopted by activists and consumers and used by social scientists to describe people ‘fighting back’ against oppression and subjugation. However, when safety concerns arise for young people, ‘resistance’ is typically used to indicate negative or disruptive behaviours rather than evidence of their resilience and strength, or their efforts to self-preserve in oppressive social contexts and relationships. Through the ‘Imagining Resistance’ project, we sought to answer the following questions:

1. What does resistance look like and mean to young people affected by sexual abuse and exploitation?

2. How might participatory visual methods help young people represent and understand their own experience of resistance and how might they help change professional practice and shape the discourses surrounding sexual exploitation and violence?

The project methodology aligned with O’Neil’s (2012) conceptualisation of ‘ethno-mimesis’, involving ethnographic participatory research alongside visual and poetic representations created by fifteen young people aged 13-25 during a series of workshops held in partnership with three youth charities in 2021-22. The project considered everyone, including researchers, artists, youth workers and young people, as members with potential to influence creative outputs and a collective understanding of what resistance is, how it manifests in contexts of oppression and subjugation, and its role in facilitating young survivors’ own beliefs regarding their capacity for resilience, self-efficacy, agency, and power.

In doing so, we sought to ‘make the familiar strange’ (Mannay, 2016) and fight against familiar language that forces tidy categories for research methodologies, the roles of participants and facilitators, and understandings of risk and victimisation. We are now in the process of analysing the findings, and making sense of how the process of careful, reflective, and sometimes unpredictable workshop spaces enabled young people to re-envision and re-narrate experiences of victimisation as acts of resistance, self-preservation, and radical self-care. Reframing resistance through visual and creative participatory methods facilitated a shared recognition amongst young people and adults involved in the project regarding what subtle (or covert) as well as disruptive and overt acts of resistance made young people feel:

- Powerful
- Weightless
- Fun
- Defiant
- Relief
- Protective
- Kind
- Capable

Young people also spoke about how acts of resistance that were interpreted by adults as either pro-social (such as choosing not to fight another young person at school) and anti-social (such as choosing to get into trouble in a classroom) were a means of fighting back against ‘expectation overload’, when they felt as if they were being asked for more than they were able to give. Resisting those expectations enabled them to feel strong and capable of protecting a core self- who they ‘really’ were and who they imagined themselves to be.

As researchers, we learned a lot about resisting the pressure to idealise collaborative, participatory and creative processes. The Imagining Resistance project set out to bring an arts and humanities perspective into a field dominated by social scientific and professional discourses of child protection, safeguarding, and risk and while we have done that, more generally, we have not met many of our own expectations regarding the kind of data we expected to collect. Many of the young participants in our research were not particularly interested in photography; our plans to draw upon the photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997) largely did not work. What we are doing instead now, is allowing our central concept- ‘resistance’ to act as a beacon for the project, shedding light on the myriad ways in which resistance to a particular version of creative methods is paving the way for more authentic, collaborative, safe and brave spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013) for participatory research practices that remain flexible enough to ‘change as we go along’ (Fletcher, 2018).

For more information on this project, please visit our website: imaginingresistance.com

Spotlight 4 on Imaginative Methodologies

Rejuvenating Rights

Tessa Lewin (Institute of Development Studies)

Within the field of child and youth rights and participation, girls and young women have been a focus of funding and attention over recent years, with many large, multi-year programmes on girls’ education and girls’ sexual and reproductive health rights, for example. The Rejuvenate project has been looking to understand the impact of this attention and funding. After conducting an initial mapping exercise of interventions, we have built a dataset that looks at how interventions with girls have been evidenced within development. We are currently writing a review of this evidence. In it we set out to articulate (and evidence) why there are ‘gaps’ in terms of what ‘evidence of impact’ is available particularly in relation to substantively participatory work with girls. We also want to show why it is that the collection of particular forms of evidence (quantitative and outcomes-based) is often not desirable or appropriate in the context of substantively participatory work. We think this will serve as an excellent resource for reflection and will drive more innovation and creative work in this space.

‘Rejuvenate’ is a programme based at the Institute of Development studies and the University of the Highlands and Islands, that recognises the value that children and young people can bring when they are given the space and support to do so. It is directed by Tessa Lewin (at IDS) and Vicky Johnson (at UHI). Our early work produced a ‘Living Archive’, which is a mapping and collation of substantively participatory child rights projects, practitioners, and associated literature. We see the archive as a convening magnet for those that do participatory work in the child rights space.

Through all our activities, the programme has aimed to re-energise and convene those working in the field of child rights, pulling together a tangible network of practitioners and academics who have been enthusiastic about sharing lessons and challenges with peers. The programme has provided a valuable thinking space for the field, with many of our network members participating directly in our dialogues or writing a blog for our website with their reflections on the challenges they, or the sector, are facing. [Our blogs](#) have covered a wide range of issues, including climate change, accountability, safeguarding, local governance, gender backlash, embodied approaches, education and gender-based violence.

Between September 2021 and September 2022, we convened a series of dialogues in each of which presenters contributed evidence that child, girl and youth-led approaches work and are essential to impact. The key issues from these dialogues have been based around timely topics: gender, uncertainty, Covid-19, creative praxis and evidence. Each dialogue featured provocations or presentations from network members, followed by time for discussion. We also dedicated a dialogue specifically to gender to interrogate the challenges and opportunities of working at the intersection of gender and child and youth rights and participation.

We have now produced a number of outputs based on these dialogues. Recordings of the dialogues are available via the [IDS YouTube channel](#) and we produced short and simple summary papers for each event: [gender](#), [uncertainty](#), [Covid-19](#), [creative praxis](#) and [evidence](#). Our first working paper focused on 'how to' do participation well, our dialogue on evidence focused instead on how and why we evidence rights. We recently collaborated with the Rights Studio to produce an animation '[Children can do a lot](#)'. We are currently compiling a book of the interviews that we did with 'field experts' for our first working paper. Finally, we are delighted to note that our network has now grown to over 150 individuals ranging from local NGOs to representatives from international actors such as Plan International, UNICEF and Terre des Hommes.

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Highlights from CIRCY events this year

CIRCY hosts exciting and inclusive events throughout the year, including members' workshops, seminars, reading group, and conferences.

CIRCY's ten year anniversary symposium

Thank you to all our CIRCY colleagues, students and friends from far and near who joined us either online or in-person for our symposium to celebrate CIRCY's 10 year anniversary on the 29th November 2022.

We began by celebrating and reflecting on the CIRCY journey, hearing from Janet Boddy, one of our first co-directors, and Michelle Lefevre and Liam Berriman, our current co-directors. Our two headline speakers then went on to trouble concepts of children's agency and rights in these contemporary times.

[Professor Carlene Firmin](#) from Durham University began with, 'Grappling with the grey: conceptual, legal and practical barriers to safeguarding young people who are both victimized and victimize others in extrafamilial contexts'. This was followed by [Professor Sonia Livingstone](#) from LSE who presented on 'Reconfiguring Youth Vulnerability in the digital age: A child's rights perspective'.

Following each presentation, Sonia and Carlene engaged in a stimulating dialogue and reflection on each other's perspectives, before they responded to questions from both those in-person and online.

The symposium ended with the sound of CIRCY colleagues and friends connecting and discussing the themes from the symposium while enjoying some delicious canapes!

Coffee and Collaboration

Our coffee and collaboration events offered an opportunity for networking, and involved short presentations by CIRCY members on innovative aspects of their research. This year we ran the events in hybrid fashion with some joining us via Zoom and some in-person on campus. Colleagues that presented this year included **Charlie Rumsby** (Childhood and Youth), **Mary Wickenden** (Institute of Development Studies), **Helen Drew** (Psychology), **Simon Flack** (Law), **Roni Eyal-Lubling** (Social Work and Social Care), **Ali Lacey**, **Noëmi Van Oordt** (Education).

CIRCY Seminars

- In October CIRCY and CSWIR welcomed **Prof. Penelope Leach** to share her new book 'Your baby and child'. Dr Penelope Leach is a renowned developmental child psychologist. Her research includes work on discipline, the effects of babies on their parents, and an ongoing look at childcare in the UK.

- In February CIRCY and CSWIR hosted a seminar with **Dr. Rameela Raman** on 'Informing policy development and implementation in the child welfare system using integrated administrative data: An example from the United States'. An Associate Professor of Biostatistics at Vanderbilt University, Rameela presented examples of real-world policy-relevant research projects from her work with a US child welfare system to motivate a discussion on the advantages and challenges of using linked data. She also touched on the types of research questions that can be addressed through linked data and demonstrate interactive ways of presenting and communicating analysis results.

- In March, CIRCY welcomed **Dr. Afua Twum-Danso Imoh** from the University of Bristol for a seminar on 'troubling the Binary Between the Global North and Global South and the Implications of Childhood Studies'. This presentation not only explored the limitations of the Global North-South binary, especially in relation to studies and discussions of childhoods globally, but it also called for the need to move beyond this binary.

- In April CIRCY ran a lunchtime workshop with **Dr. Monika Grønli Rosten** and **Dr. Monica Five Aarset** who were visiting fellows from NOVA Social Research Institute at OsloMet University. Monica and Monika presented some of their recent work on studying minoritized youth on behalf of a concerned welfare state, where they were experimenting with methods and co-research.

- CSWIR AND CIRCY also welcomed **Dr. Gozde Burger** for a joint seminar offering a creative exploration of young people's experiences of parental divorce in Turkey and England. The presentation was based on the research conducted for Gozde's PhD in Social Work at Bristol University. Underpinned by the sociology of childhood and a children's rights-based perspective, Gozde's research emphasises young people's voices through semi-structured interviews and creative methods (post-cards, timeline and eco-map) in two different societal contexts

The CIRCY doctoral community

The doctoral researchers' 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.

Network meetings were co-facilitated by Michelle Lefevre and Liam Berriman (CIRCY Co-Directors) and Brontë McDonald (CIRCY Postgraduate Research Assistant).

We started the academic year meeting together to share our experiences and challenges of researching with children during a PhD, particularly focusing on the barriers to recruiting children into research. We moved onto focusing on researching within the digital context with children and youth and the ethical and safeguarding considerations for this. We also had a really interesting discussion around analysing visual data with Kathleen Bailey sharing her research and creative methods of visually representing her data with young children.

Three of our students completed their doctorates in the last year and we extend congratulations to [Devyn Glass](#), [Martin Brown](#) and [Leethen Bartholomew](#).

Leethen Bartholomew successfully defended his PhD thesis in March on [Accusations of Witchcraft and Spirit Possession: Exploring the Experiences and Outcomes for Accused and Non-accused Children within the Family](#). Leethen's thesis examines what these accusations mean, their contexts and impacts, and the challenges for professional response. His is the first research empirically to explore the experiences of non-accused as well as accused children, to do so from multiple participant perspectives, and to conceptualise the phenomenon through the combined lenses of critical realism, ecological and cultural anthropological theories. Leethen was supervised by Elaine Sharland and Russell Whiting (Social Work and Social Care). The internal examiner was Tish Marrable (Social Work and Social Care) and the external examiner was Professor Andrew Whittaker, from London South

Bank University. The examiners recommended awarding the doctorate unconditionally, commending the richness of Leethen's thesis, his tenacity in pursuing this work in such a hard-to-research area, and the value of his findings and insights to inform professional practice and education.

Devyn Glass studied for her PhD with Nicola Yuill (Psychology). Her thesis was on 'Beyond the Social Motor Synchrony Model of Autism: Autistic children and familiar partners can synchronise movements through tailored tasks and contexts'. Devyn's examiners were Elian Fink (Psychology) and Dr Beatriz Lopez from the University of Portsmouth.

Martin Brown

Martin was supervised by Yusuf Sayed and Mario Novelli. His examiners were Julia Sutherland (Education) and Professor Salah Troudi from the School of Education, University of Exeter. Martin told us: "I graduated on the 17th July so as to spend time with both of my children, Louise and Lucas, in Brighton. My daughter Louise will leave home to begin her studies in International Relations at Durham University from September 25th 2023. Lucas is at BHASVIC studying for A levels. I have included a photo of us celebrating!



Martin Brown celebrating graduation with his children.

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A background image showing a sunny day at Brighton. In the foreground, a paved promenade is filled with people walking. To the left, there are green patio umbrellas and outdoor seating. In the background, the Brighton Pier extends into the sea, and the beach is visible with people sunbathing. The sky is clear and blue.

The Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY) is located within the School of Education and Social Work which is based in Essex House on the University of Sussex campus.

The University is situated on a modern campus on the edge of the South Downs National Park near the lively seaside city of Brighton. London is one hour away by train, and there is easy access to Gatwick and Heathrow airports.

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