



UNIVERSITY of
WORCESTER

SPRIG Newsletter



Updates from our SPRIG meetings

Since the last newsletter, we have had some really interesting presentations and discussions in the SPRIG meetings. Here is a snapshot of what we have been doing:

In January, **Dr Rachael Paige** presented a snapshot of her PhD research into “teacher presence” which she referred to as “the X factor of teaching”, sharing examples from case studies and leading a fascinating discussion on whether teacher presence is innate or can be learned. The ‘energy of connection’ she described between teacher and children aligns strongly with the philosophy of Social Pedagogy.

In February, **Dr Carla Solvason** shared an overview of several of her research projects, which all had the same theme of listening and valuing those that often go unheard.

In March, **Samantha Sutton-Tsang** shared her research using a case study approach in an international school in the United Arab Emirates exploring The Curiosity Approach in practice.

Johanna Cliffe also shared some advice on how you can develop pieces of writing for publication in a journal...see more about Jo on page 4.



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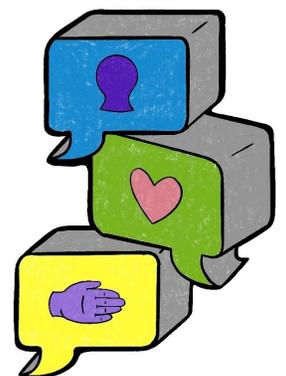
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NLCBF Relational Practice with Care Experienced Young People - Love in professional practice

Over 100 people joined this free webinar online on Wednesday 22nd January 2025 to converse about Love in Professional Practice.

Why does love matter?

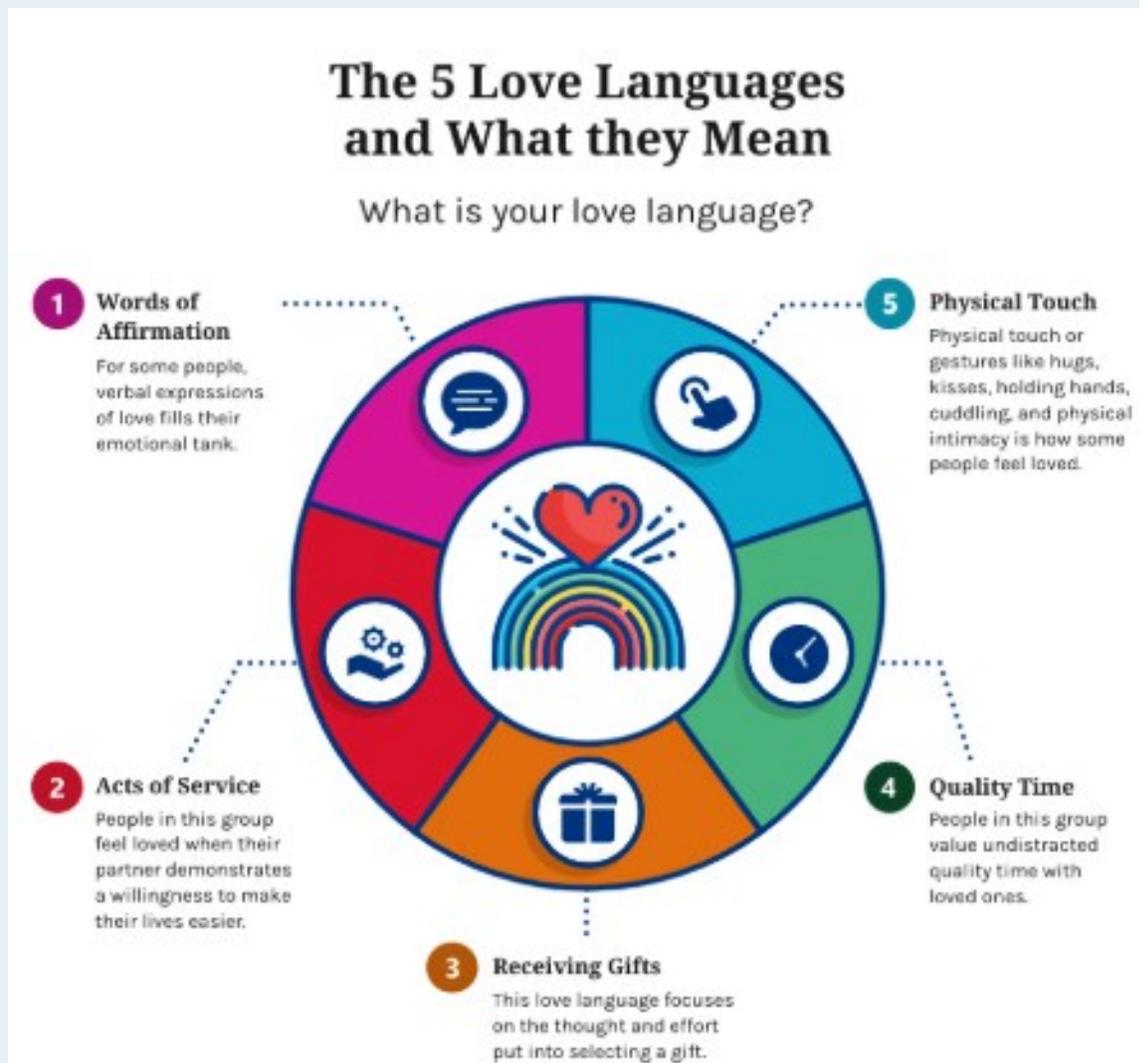
In it's simplest answer... Because we're human. The webinar highlighted the importance of love to feel loved, to support emotional and social development, to enable recovery from trauma and Adverse life experiences, to know what good relationships look like so we can model this.

During the webinar, we heard from Jonny Masters from the National House Project and explored the 5 love languages and what these mean or how they can present themselves in our own practice.

The resources shared during the webinar on *Relational Practice* can be found here: <https://leavingcare.org/relational-practice-resources/>

If you are interested in signing up to any of the free webinars available in the series, please visit: <https://leavingcare.org/free-lunchtime-webinar-series-on-relational-practice/>

Image from: [Vengeance](#)



DCF February Conference for students and professional partners in practice, 2025

Last month we held our annual DCF conference which, for the first time, was opened up to our Professional Partners. Adopting Social Pedagogy as part of the conference theme, we hoped to engage with practitioners to 'nurture connections' and encourage community, early childhood and family engagement in practice.

We had an amazing line up with representation from University of Worcester colleagues from across disciplines as well as representation from NSPCC and Early Years Alliance at our Networking Café.

A keynote from **Simon Taylor**, Department for Education and Inclusion. Simon exploring different definitions of creativity, discussing why it is so important for children's wellbeing and development and how we might authentically foster it within our settings by engaging with families and communities using examples from Reggio Emilia.

The keynote from **Nicola Stobbs** and **Kate Collier**, [Play Worcester](#), helped attendees understand the importance of bringing people closer and fostering mutual respect within communities. They also highlighted the significance of play and inclusion in community settings, inspiring attendees to create more creative opportunities in their practice.

A workshop from **Dr Angela Hodgkins**, Department for Children and Families, focussed on empathy and compassion satisfaction in early childhood practice, including examples from practitioners, demonstrating that, in many ways, early childhood practice truly is the best job in the world.

A session presented by **Johanna Cliffe**, explored the importance of creating a nurturing environment in early years, through cultivating relationships and connections, curiosity, awe and wonder, prioritising a relationships focussed pedagogy in practice.

Denisse Levermore, Department of Psychology and Mental Health, delivered an interactive workshop taking a dive into the world of infant mental health, providing valuable insights into brain development and mental health, exploring how we can support babies in their earliest years.

Michelle Malomo and Olivia Storey, Department for Children and Families, applied Sturrock and Elise's (1998) theoretical framework of psycholudics and the play cycle in their hands-on workshop on healing through play.

Anne Ferguson, presented a session exploring some of the traditional ways that we can keep children safe in this country by empowering them, reflecting on discourses that perpetuate abuse.

Stacey Hodgkins' workshop on working with marginalized communities, particularly Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities, was praised for increasing awareness and understanding of these groups.

Nicola Stobbs and Kate Collier's workshop on social pedagogy and community engagement encouraged attendees to explore community-based approaches and provided practical advice and resources.

Simon Taylor's workshop on growth and development inspired attendees to consider new approaches and clarified their group ethos through the creation of a manifesto.



The poster is for the 'Department for Children and Families Conference' at the University of Worcester. It features a pink and blue color scheme. At the top, it says 'You are invited to the Department for Children and Families Conference'. Below that, the subtitle is 'Nurturing Connections: Community-Based Approaches to Social Pedagogy, Early Childhood, and Family Engagement'. The date and location are 'Saturday 8th February 2025, registration @ University of Worcester, St Johns Campus @ 8.30am'. Keynote speakers listed are Simon Taylor (Creativity in the early years) and Niki Stobbs (Social pedagogy and community engagement). Interactive workshops include Denisse Levermore (Supporting an infant's social and emotional development), Johanna Cliffe (Creating a nurturing environment in early years education), and Stacey Hodgkins (Working with marginalised families). The poster also includes the University of Worcester logo and illustrations of people.

You are invited to the
Department for Children and Families Conference
Nurturing Connections: Community-Based Approaches to Social Pedagogy, Early Childhood, and Family Engagement

Saturday 8th February 2025, registration @ University of Worcester, St Johns Campus @ 8.30am

Keynote speakers:

- ✓ Simon Taylor - Creativity in the early years
- ✓ Niki Stobbs - Social pedagogy and community engagement

Interactive workshops, including:

- ✓ Denisse Levermore - Supporting an infant's social and emotional development
- ✓ Johanna Cliffe - Creating a nurturing environment in early years education
- ✓ Stacey Hodgkins - Working with marginalised families

“The Power of Listening and Valuing Stories in Social Pedagogy”

Our book proposal has now been sent to publisher Routledge for their consideration. The book, titled “The Power of Listening and Valuing Stories in Social Pedagogy,” will be written by members of the Social Pedagogy RiG and the Social Pedagogy Professional Association.

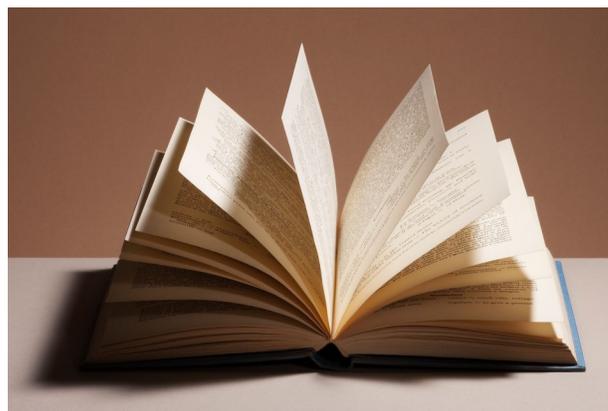
The idea originated from the international Social Pedagogy event “Transformative Tales,” which we co-hosted in November 2024. In the book, we explore how listening to and valuing the stories of others can enhance our understanding of those we support.

The proposal is for a book with 27 chapters, written by researchers, educators, health and social care practitioners, and managers. It will be managed and edited by Angela Hodgkins, Carla Solvason, and Emma Laurence. The book will be divided into four sections:

- ⇒ The Concept of Storytelling and Its Relation to Social Pedagogy
- ⇒ Stories and Education
- ⇒ Stories and Health & Social Care
- ⇒ Stories and Research Approaches

If the commissioning editor approves the proposal, it will then go to reviewers who will comment on the chapters and provide their views on whether it should be published. We believe this is an important and timely book, as social pedagogy gains momentum.

In the spirit of social pedagogy, we hope this will be a supportive and inclusive project that encourages and supports those new to academic writing.



Sharing Research

SPRIG Lead, Dr Carla Solvason, invited to share views at education policy roundtable

One of the key themes of Carla Solvason's research over the past ten years has been the relationship between parents and educators. As well as co-writing a book on the topic with Johanna Cliffe, she has published articles on teacher relationships with the parents of children with Special Educational Needs, Maintained Nursery School's relationships with parents and the importance of recognising the impact of parent wellbeing to a child's educational success. In recognition of her expertise in this area Carla has been invited to a roundtable with Education Support entitled *Unmet Needs: Parent-Teacher Tensions and their impact on retention*. The meeting will take place at the Education Policy Institute's offices in London in April. This roundtable will bring together politicians, school leaders and sector representatives to consider how parent-teacher tensions can be alleviated given the significant wider factors at play; and what role education policy can play in rebuilding the social contract.

Promoting Gender Equality in Primary Schools

CPD for your staff

Training tailored to your school

Why gender equality is a relevant issue

The power of teacher reflection

Tips for bringing about change

Embedding equality in the curriculum



Dr. Amanda Sheehy, university researcher and practising primary school teacher, is offering equality training for your school staff. Training will provide an opportunity to learn about the most recent research in promoting gender equality in primary schools as well as practical advice for bringing about change in your setting.

Two sessions are recommended: the first session introduces the reflective process and raises awareness of issues; the second session initiates a more rigorous process of scrutiny of practice and equips you to develop an action plan. In person, hour-long workshops are recommended.

Please email amandasheehy@hotmail.com with enquiries or to book a workshop.

Training Sessions for Schools

Amanda Sheehy is still offering training for primary schools. Amanda's training sessions are underpinned by her PhD research and aim to promote gender equality.

Please forward these details to your primary teaching contacts.

(Re)imagining the social pedagogy within early childhood education and care (ECEC): a (re)exploration of the power and importance of relationships and connections.

Written by Johanna Cliffe for the International Journal of Social Pedagogy



The purpose of this article was to explore early years education and care (ECEC) through a social pedagogy lens. I believe strongly in the power and importance of relationships and connections and feel that they play a pivotal role in children and young people's holistic development and well-being.

Yet, despite increasing research to suggest the benefits of social pedagogy and more relationship – centred approaches, in England, social pedagogy and the role of the social pedagogue are marginalised.

At grassroots level many early childhood practitioners (EYPs) are tenaciously upholding these values, yet there is little appetite for them at policy level. In fact, many professionals find themselves in the tenuous position of reconciling the continuous pressure to navigate personal and professional pedagogy, with often competing policy dictates. A situation that can be untenable, leading many to burn out and leave the profession.

The disconnect between what is known and accepted by those professionals who work in the sector every day, and the inattention to social pedagogy within English education institutions and policy makers, is, as Moss and Petrie (2019) noted, a disservice on every level.

My aim with this article was to not only reconnect with the power and importance of relationships, connections and social pedagogic approaches, but to offer practicable and practical ways forward for ECPs and ECEC.

Social pedagogy is always political

The notion that ECEC is inherently political at practice and policy level, has always been quite contentious, yet in many ways I feel it is unavoidable. With each successive government, a hidden utopian vision of education, that is grounded in the party's priorities and ideals, is brought to bear on policy which in turn further shapes practices (Gallagher and Stobbs, 2023).

Understanding, rather than ignoring, the political arena can support ECPs in knowing how and when to challenge practices, as well as what to accept and what to resist in regard to discourse. This is a powerful and important step in (re)imagining a better future for ECEC that aligns with ECP's Haltung and professional identity.

For many years, future-focused, assessment-driven practice that prioritises intellectual and academic capacities over social competences, has taken centre stage. This is undoubtedly the results of neoliberalism, alongside the marketisation of ECEC, where the quality of education is driven by, and synonymous with, performativity and accountability agendas.

In the England, ECEC attempts an uneasy bridge between often openly contradictory positions with regard to underpinning pedagogy and principles. The cornerstone of practice is enshrined within unique child principles and child-centred practices (DfE, 2023); yet, policy is becoming increasingly homogenised, with less acknowledgement for diversity, difference and individualisation (Robert-Holmes and Moss, 2021; Stobbs et al., 2023). Drawing on a social pedagogy approach that (re)prioritises relationships and connections, could change the tide of societal values; creating the change that we want to see.

Current policy trends have fostered a slow but relentless shift in principles and the narrative within ECEC, from how ECEC, ECPs, policy and wider society can best serve their children and young people, to how children and young people might serve society. Global competitiveness and social capital are essential for economic growth, therefore, I believe the government already know the future workforce, skills and knowledge needed to shore up this reality (Campbell-Barr and Nygard, 2014; Moss and Cameron, 2020; Robert-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Policy, therefore, becomes more about reproducing a desired reality that fits the current dominant discourses and ideals.

This reductionist view of education is not one that I resonate with, nor was it one that I signed up for. The words of Robert-Holmes and Moss (2021, p.106) are never more poignant than when stating, ECEC in England currently invests in the image of “poor child ... [who is merely]... a reproducer of knowledge, values and identity, and yet to be realised human capital”.

This seems a far cry from the “thriving garden for children” where children are nurtured and can flourish as described by Eichsteller and Holthoff (2011, p.33), and where collective wellbeing and human dignity, along with a view of rich agentic child, can be nurtured.

However, without an awareness and some consensus of what the purpose of education is, and our role as professionals within it, I fear that ECEC will continue to be buffeted by political agendas and discursive discourse.

Although I agree with Biesta (2012, p.95), in that education should focus on the quality, power and importance of what occurs “in-between a child and their world”. I am keenly aware of the alternative view, where the purpose of education is merely to fill children with as much knowledge as possible in as fast a time as possible (Clark, 2023).

Education becomes a race against time for children to get moving down the same learning pathways that millions of children have trod before. There is little room for freedom of thought, nor does it encourage innovation or creativity, eventually it the only option becomes more technicist practises and stagnation in what it is possible to think and know.

I fear this leads to quite a passive learning experience and tensions in practice, as ECPs fell less willing or confident to follow the child's lead due to the overfocus on maximising every teachable moment.

Therefore, this article was in part my own resistance and challenge to what I believe is a damaging trend in discourse that does not serve the our youngest children well, nor does it adequately prepare them to be the creative, innovative, free thinkers they will need to be.

I have drawn on the concepts of Haltung (Charfe and Gardner, 2020), Slow pedagogy (Clarke, 2023), wonder (L'Ecuyer, 2014; Bjerknes et al. 2023), caring apprenticeships (Noddings, 2013) and Deleuzoguattarian (1987) philosophy, to offer practical ways forward for ECPs seeking change within their practice.

If we want children to thrive and flourish and to feel loved and respected, then approaches in ECEC matter more than ever before. Social pedagogy, relationships and connections matter more than ever before. The power for change does not rest with children but with us. We must decide how we will use it and use it wisely!

Cliffe, J. (2024). (Re)imagining the social pedagogy within early childhood education and care: a (re)exploration of the power and importance of relationships and connections. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, 13(1): 14. <https://journals.uclpress.co.uk/ijsp/article/pubid/IJSP-13-14/>

Welcoming our newest members to the SPRIG

Introducing Rich Holmes...

With 20 years in the non-profit and social impact sector, I specialize in participatory practice, community-led development, systems change, and trauma-informed practice. My career has spanned leadership roles, including Managing Director at KCA, where I focused on embedding trauma-informed approaches, and Director of Learning and Community Building at Barnwood Trust, where I developed asset-based community development practices.



Earlier in my career, I worked in education as a Service Manager at Gloucestershire County Council for Playing for Success—a national initiative using sport to inspire learning in young people, delivered in partnership with professional sports clubs. Beyond this, I have led mixed-ability expeditions with disabled people, including a horseback adventure in the Andes. Now, I run my own consultancy, **Go Together** (www.gotogether.org.uk), where I collaborate with organisations and teams to develop tools and practices for relational work, strengthening community power and fostering collaborative systems leadership.

Introducing Adebimpe Seriki...

My thesis topic, **Addressing Inequities in Basic Education Access and Policies: A Critical Analysis of Regional and Gender Disparities in Nigeria**, explores the continued inequalities in Nigeria's education system.

Although primary education is officially free and compulsory under the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, millions of Nigerian children still remain out of school. Despite government efforts to improve basic education, significant differences in enrolment and completion rates between the northern and southern states, as well as between male and female students still persist in Nigeria.

In my study I will explore the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that cause this. Most importantly my research will provide an opportunity to hear the voices of Nigerian children and their families themselves regarding their experiences of access to education, alongside the views of educators, community leaders and policy makers.



Celebratory News!

Congratulations to Emma Laurence who passed her viva for her PhD last month. Her study, entitled “People-powered leaders: A case study exploration of how collaborative leadership development programmes can support school leaders emotionally and professionally” explores the impact of collegiate networks on leaders and their leadership. The findings of the study provide greater insight into how school leaders can be supported both personally and professionally. It identifies that over time, nurturing professional relationships based upon trust, humility and reciprocity have the potential to create environments of psychological safety in the pressurised sphere of school leadership. The data suggests that non-directive coaching approaches, collaborative learning networks and high-quality research can all contribute to the development of the context-sensitive understandings required for managing system complexity. The result of this is the potential for higher levels of challenge, innovation, and greater adaptive capacity. This is experienced by school leaders as a supportive factor in their ability to sustain their role, providing a renewed sense of hope and empowerment within and across school networks.



Emma said that she was “absolutely thrilled to have passed the viva and so grateful to the incredible support of both her supervisory team and the examining team who were incredibly positive about the work and made the viva process genuinely enjoyable”. Following the viva, Emma’s friends surprised her with a tour of a vineyard and an 8-course meal to celebrate (pictured). Emma is currently working through the minor amendments and is in discussions with participants regarding how best to ensure this work has the impact they would like.

Our latest publications

Solvason, C., Sutton-Tsang, S., & Stobbs, N. (2025). Heading for burnout: The early years workforce in England post COVID-19. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 0(0). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1476718X241308402>

Carla and Sam have also been invited to share this research at the University of Leeds’ [Early Years Employment Research Hub](#), which is hosted at the University of Leeds business school.

More books in production for 2025....

Hodgkins, A. (2025) *Nurturing Compassionate Connections: A Guide to Practitioner Empathy in the Early Years*, London: Speechmark, Routledge.

Prowle, A., Hodgkins, A. and Thomas, R. (2025) *Beyond Poverty’s Reach: Transforming children’s lives through collective impact*, London: Speechmark, Routledge.

Prowle, A. and Stobbs, N. (2025) *Therapeutic Approaches When Working with Children and Families*, London: Routledge.

Watson, N, Lengthorn, E., Solvason, C. and Elliott, G. (2025) *Sustainability in Education*, London: Routledge.



Social Pedagogy

Research Group

University of Worcester



SPRIG meeting dates 2024-2025:

All meetings are held 4.15-6.15pm at the University of Worcester (St John's campus)

Wednesday 12th Mar (room BY1148)

Thursday 10th April (room BY1148)

Monday 12th May (room BY1148)

Tuesday 17th June (room BY1148)

These meetings are a time for members to share their own research and gain feedback and encouragement.



Social Pedagogy

Research Group

University of Worcester

Group lead:

Carla Solvason

c.solvason@worc.ac.uk



Co-lead & co-editor:

Angela Hodgkins

a.hodgkins@worc.ac.uk



Co-editor:

Samantha Sutton-Tsang

s.sutton-

tsang@worc.ac.uk



Newsletter produced by Angela Hodgkins and Samantha Sutton-Tsang