



LIVERPOOL HOPE
UNIVERSITY



BLUE SKY STORIES

WORKSHOP



LIVED EXPERIENCES IN THE CLASSROOM



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ABOUT US



We are a part of a group of researchers at Liverpool Hope University who specialise in child development. Our key areas of expertise include; language, literacy, social and emotional development. We believe support in these areas are key to improving the wellbeing and life chances of our children. We publish research, deliver workshops to teachers, and run community events for children and their families.

In this booklet are a series of case studies* that illustrate some of the diverse learning and teaching experiences occurring within school settings. Based on our own evidence and that of others, we have made some suggestions that can be explored by educators to help enhance children's potential to learn.

We would welcome you getting in touch because collaboration with young people, families, teachers, community groups and policy-makers is very important to us.

Lorna and Simon

Developmental Psychology Research Group

- All names are pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of the children

THE TEAM



Lorna Bourke, PhD

is interested in why children differ and considers having expectations that everyone should be the same lacks creativity and causes inequality. She looks at how our memories help to generate ideas and words to write stories to support families and schools. Lorna has been the Principal Investigator on a grant by the British Academy to support this work. E: bourkel@hope.ac.uk



Jamie Lingwood, PhD

is interested in how adult-child interactions influence children's language development. He is currently doing some research on how to foster a love of reading with reception year children. Jamie is Principal Investigator on Love to Read Reception Years E: lingwoj@hope.ac.uk



Elizabeth Parr, EdD

is one of the lead teachers implementing the Communication, Language and Literacy Development Programme. She is involved in the curriculum development and delivery of the BA (QTS) and PGCE curriculum English. Liz is interested in perceptions towards community-oriented schooling. In addition, she is Principal Investigator on www.writingovertime.org.uk, working with local authorities to improve writing outcomes for children.



Simon Davies, PhD

investigates the development of face drawing skills in young children, and the association between feature binding of sounds and symbols in the context of writing development. He has been awarded a British Academy Grant for his work.

THE TEAM



Linda Kerr, EdD Candidate

is interested in young boys' views on learning to read in the classroom and at home; their reading tastes and how they access stories and information. She is also interested in the views of parents, caregivers and practitioners who support boys with their reading: E: kerrl@hope.ac.uk



Pinar Oztop, PhD

is interested in what influences children's creativity and collaboration. She is also exploring how children understand others' feelings and thoughts. E: oztopp@hope.ac.uk



Marta Wesierska, PhD

is interested in children's language learning and reading, in particular in multilingual speakers. She is also interested in how children and teenagers learn grammar. E: wesierm@hope.ac.uk



Wing Kai Fung, PhD

is interested in understanding more about the benefits of supporting children's play activities in school and in the home. He makes important links between this and young children's ability to make friends, and progress in their school work. E: fungw@hope.ac.uk

CASE STUDY 1



Michael

is in Year 6 (aged 11) and when approaching discipline is very defensive and defiant. He does not have a diagnosis for any disorders or disabilities. His home life is unstable and he has witnessed violence from a young age.

Emotion regulation

Providing opportunities for children to enhance their emotional knowledge improves their social skills as well. It helps them to regulate emotion more easily. That is, use healthy strategies to diffuse or moderate negative emotions which are causing them to come into conflict with others at school.

One important starting point in the process is to acknowledge with Michael that while all behaviours might not be ok, all feelings are. If possible, the whole class can take part in activities to learn more about this.

Playing songs with feeling words in them is a fun way of getting a class to think about emotions.



Breathing exercises such as belly breathing, rainbow breathing, dragon breaths, and balloon breathing should create a few laughs within the classroom. A main talking point with the children is the ability to change *how* you feel with some training. An example of belly breathing is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RiMb2Bw4Ae8>

The school offers a point of contrast to role models within the home, but this may not be easily understood by Michael. Therefore, it becomes even more important that adults in the school environment are able to consistently model emotional control. Thus, leaving no ambiguity in communication with him, that it is possible to do so.

CASE STUDY 1

Empathy training

Like emotion control, empathy should be modelled so that Michael and his peers understand what it looks, sounds and feels like. It should be modelled even when you feel disappointed in his behaviour and know there will need to be consequences.

Introducing acting classes is a good way to help children see things from other people's perspectives. They could also choose a film to discuss how the actor or animated character shows emotion and how the audience are helped to see something from their perspective.

Empathy map

Use the empathy map template on the next page to discuss an issue that someone is experiencing. This can be done with an individual child or as a whole class activity.

Using post-it notes, label what the issue is for the person at the centre of the map (real or imagined). Examples could be: one of their best friends called them names; two children would not let them join their game; someone knocked some water onto their school lunch; they broke a school rule; they don't want to do work in class.

The quadrants should be used for the children to write on post it notes what the person says, does [observable] and thinks, feels [inferred]. For example, , What did they say? "*I hate you*"; "*Go away*", What do they do? "*Rock on chair*"; "*Run off*", What do they think? "*Why are people mean to me*"; "*Other people don't understand*". What do they feel? "*They feel angry*"; "*They feel bored*".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gL-KNQCdjR0>



Empathy map template

THINK	SAY
FEEL	DO
IMAGE OF PERSON AND ISSUE	

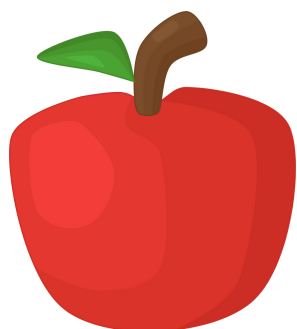
WHAT WE LEARNED

[1]

[2]

[3]

CASE STUDY: 1



Positive teaching

Positive parenting is a sensitive and responsive parenting style which could be adopted in the classroom by teachers. It promotes an affectionate and engaged style of interaction with children (remember the modelling empathy); so discipline is used when needed but it is firm rather than harsh.

In a highly charged situation, *distraction* can be used to enable the child to calm down until they are ready to listen. This could mean that the discipline 'chat' about consequences does not happen straight away. Instead the child should be encouraged to engage in the class activity or a modified version of it. After all that is the main goal of diverting the child away from behaviour that is preventing them and possibly others from doing this. The rules and why they are important can explained once the child has been able to regulate their emotion; show positive behaviour. If possible work with the child's interests to increase motivation within school.

Empathy training may also help the class to realise there could be other explanations for why Michael is behaving in the way he is. He may want people to like him. As soon as he feels they are going to be annoyed with him becomes anxious as he does not know where that might lead - largely due to the inconsistency between home and school.

Find opportunities to build *trust and stability* with him and monitor the antecedents to negative behaviour - to be armed with as much information to counter his experience of frightening parenting.

CASE STUDY: 1



External resources



Website links can be useful in providing support/education to teachers and families for children with behavioural challenges in school and the home. The NHS weblink offers further links to organisations that can support families which may also be an avenue of support for teachers too. Although there is some focus on very young children, some of the principles and circumstances that can have an impact on behaviour are similar no matter the age of the child.

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/babys-development/behaviour/dealing-with-child-behaviour-problems/>

Alder Hey Children's hospital provide information here
<https://alderhey.nhs.uk/services/camhs>

School Nursing (St Helens) can provide dedicated support to families and school professionals <https://www.wchc.nhs.uk/services/school-nursing-st-helens/>

CASE STUDY: 2

Sacha

is in Year 5 (aged 10 years). She is registered with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND); and has poor communication skills. Sacha suffered a bereavement in the last 12 months. Her father died and her mum is understandably struggling to come to terms with the loss as well. Sacha feels traumatised. She has been referred to bereavement counselling and is engaging in regular sessions. She posts messages in the classroom worry box. However, she is feeling increasingly isolated from her peer group by her experience.

Begin to normalise the issue of loss. It is important to recognise that significant numbers of children will experience at least one loss event while they are at school (e.g., family members, pets, friendships, family life through separation and divorce). The loss itself is likely to be very upsetting but alongside this it can impact on feeling different (otherness) and young people can become socially isolated (no one knows what to say).

Set aside four times over a period of 2 weeks (total 4 days of writing) where children can journal (i.e., express in writing) stressful and negative events that happen in their lives. Children can be instructed as follows:

"Please write about your deepest thoughts and feelings concerning one or some negative and stressful events that you have experienced. The important thing is that you let go and connect with your deepest emotions and thoughts. Write about this or these events, how you experienced it. Don't worry about grammar or spelling".

Emotional disclosure through expressive writing can help improve wellbeing though changes in mood, anxiety, and *working memory* (the ability to store and work on information in memory while doing a task). Whether the child can write well or even if at all, is immaterial. Providing the time to do this is the important factor. Activities mentioned in case study 1 can help children prepare an emotion-based lexicon (positive vs negative); verbs to express states (to be); and subjective adjectives to express feelings and sensations (happy, sad, funny).

Follow up: the contents of the journal can be private since it is the act of writing that is the important part of the process. However, those children who would like to talk to their peers about their experiences can do so and work together to think about how the experience can be viewed in different ways.

CASE STUDY: 2

The Postcard Task

Although the act of expressing emotion through making marks on a page is cathartic there may be occasions where it might be more productive to try a less complicated and inclusive art-based approach. Provide each child with a postcard (deliberately restrictive in terms of size so the most important points are noted). This can also be done over several sessions, mirroring the approach in the previous activity. The child can still journal their experiences over time.

The children should be provided with a range of colours to choose from and they could use a variety of materials (e.g., pencils, felt-tip pens, paints, craft materials, magazines to cut up) to create a response to one of the following prompts:



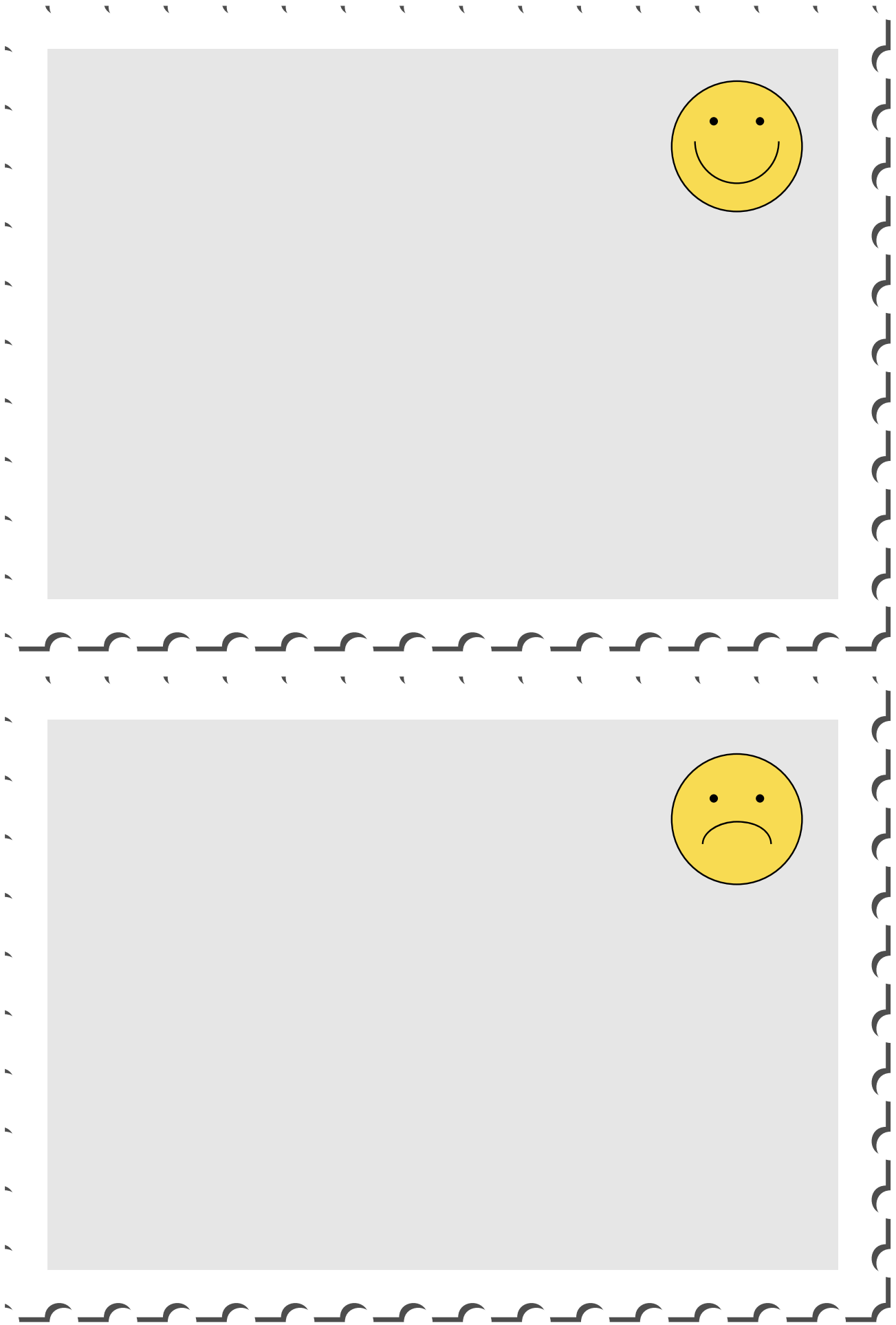
"Please draw about your deepest thoughts and feelings concerning one or some negative and stressful events that you have experienced. The important thing is that you let go and connect with your deepest emotions and thoughts. Draw about this or these events, how you experienced it. Don't worry about your drawing or colouring in/how good you are at art".

"Please draw about things or people you love. Don't worry about your drawing or colouring in/how good you are at art".

"Please draw things that make you feel *happy* on one side of the postcard. Don't worry about your drawing or colouring in/how good you are at art". When completed, ask them to draw the things that make them feel *sad* on the other side.

It also has the advantage of allowing the teacher to engage with a larger group. It provides a good starting point for children to react more freely to the material in a way that is personal to them (the point at which they may be able to put their experiences into words). It also works well cross-culturally. The teacher can collect together the things that have been learned through the task and discuss this with the class. The children and teacher can put their heads together to provide advice, guidance and solutions.

Postcard template



CASE STUDY: 3

Yasmina

is in Year 5 (aged 10 years). She is on the neurodevelopmental pathway and is known to have the characteristics of Autism. She can do maths really well but struggles significantly with any creative writing. Even when provided with reassurance and scaffolding, she will become frustrated and cry. She struggles with noise and has been provided with a quiet corner which she can access whenever she wants and wear her ear defenders. However, she gets angry with other children when they are noisy (they are not but this is her perception). She has very set ideas about what she wants to do in an activity (e.g., when asked to dramatise a scene, she wanted to play a character who wasn't in the scene and got angry with the children when they tried to explain this to her).

The challenges children with Autism face with imaginative writing is something we have written about recently in a peer reviewed article. We found compared to their peers, they were particularly constrained in being able to divert their attention (i.e., *cognitive flexibility*) to including the elaborated vocabulary that is needed to demonstrate creative thinking. On a positive note, they were equally likely to be able to develop the basics of a plot and structure for their writing. A lot of that comes from effective teaching strategies and lots of practice in developing key narrative conventions (e.g., story opening/closing, setting, characters, actions, problem, resolution).

Even though the perceptions of noise differ, it is important to validate Yasmina's own experience with her surroundings. Eventually, others including her peers may be able to advocate for a more neurodiverse understanding of the school environment at a whole school level.



CASE STUDY: 3



Individual and strength approach to learning

Yasmina has some of the characteristics of Autism, which also include strengths.

Most notably in the area of mathematics. Common to mathematics, writing involves problem-solving. It requires a strategy to reach sub-goals and goals, and a lot of thinking. Focusing on this aspect could offer an alternate approach to the task.

It would be useful to find out where Yasmina is facing the most challenge. For example, is it painstakingly searching for the right word which is then subsequently interfering with the capacity she has available to develop a structure for a plot at the same time. The rigidity in thinking that can be a characteristic of Autism may result in the search for the 'perfect sentence' leading her to a complete halt. Due to her frustration - we are assuming that being provided with a typical template for the structure of a piece of writing is not working for her.

Therefore, start by asking Yasmina to create a topic she has a special interest in. Here are some examples to choose from as well:

- Your favourite superhero needs your help. What can you do to save the day?
- Aliens land and it is your lucky job to show them around. Where will you take them?
- You're Prime Minister for a day. What do you do?
- You get £100 but you have to spend it by the end of the day. What do you do with it?
- Write about a time you felt really happy. What happened? What made you feel happy?
- Write a letter to your future self in 20 years
- If you could meet any famous person today, who would you want to meet and why? What questions might you ask them.

More ideas from www.writingovertime.org.uk/resources

CASE STUDY: 3



Free writing

Then float the idea of free writing with her. This will allow Yasmina (and other writers) to start anywhere they would like to (beginning, middle or end) as long as she is getting words onto a page (or digital device) and beginning to brainstorm.

This can be playful and creative but it is also goal-directed. At this stage no ideas are going to be censored. By writing down ideas, there may be one that emerges that can be more developed. It is possible to leave a topic and come back to it after working on something else (i.e., letting some of the brainstorming percolate).

In this case, the outline will come from the material being generated rather than trying fill one in that has already been provided to the student. Self Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) is a structured approach to writing development that is known to work very well with children with Autism as well as neurotypical peers. During the process they are encouraged to recognise how to respond adaptively to internal responses that conflict with the goal they are trying to achieve. Therefore, this takes into account challenges with emotion regulation as well.

We've mentioned modelling before, in this context demonstrate appropriate language representing internal responses of characters, vocabulary for impact and mood and atmosphere which young people with Autism can find challenging. This can be done through computer presentation or cue cards. Not only will this support current oral language skills but also alleviate some of the cognitive load (remember working memory) associated with the writing task. In addition, self-talk is a strategy that keeps us focused on a task and provides motivation to tackle challenges, unless addressed, challenges with spoken language ability will be a significant barrier to its use.

Computer assisted technology (CAI) and collaboration with peers can provide support in developing narratives. CAI can be motivational providing positive reinforcement to increase productivity and self-efficacy as students become increasingly able to accomplish some of the goals of the task.

Working with another child, Yasmina can put her ideas from free writing into a diagram or tree or mind map (i.e., graphic representation). Ask Yasmina and her partner to spot any patterns. Through brainstorming the pair can begin to put them into a hierarchical order (another goal) that will begin to develop the conventions associated with story coherence (final goal).

CASE STUDY: 4

Noah

is in Year 5 (aged 10 years) and working at age 5 level. The class are very gentle and kind with him but he doesn't tend to play with children and will wander around the playground without engaging with others unless prompted. He will join activities when invited.

As most teachers recognise there are considerable individual differences in how far children feel comfortable with socialisation. Having established though that Noah would like to be involved in play activities with other children we suggest the following:

Use the postcard task to see how Noah is feeling about the situation. It will give a baseline from which to establish whether any intervention that the school tries is working. Involving the other children who seem willing to take a compassionate approach to Noah's differences, set up a structured playtime activity a couple of days each week (at the same time) - where it would be expected that Noah participates and is something fun that all children can participate in. The children might like to be involved in making decisions about what this might be.



TEACHER WELLBEING

Safeguarding mental health

Supporting children, families and colleagues in the challenges they face, can take a toll on the individual. It is very important that teachers have safe spaces to off load some of this - often finding a quiet area to do this for a short time can be helpful to process thoughts and feelings. Then make decisions about what to do next.

We notice that teachers are trying to think of every avenue they can explore to be able to improve the educational experiences of children. They often need reassurance that when they feel they have tried everything - that they have. Especially in that moment. A lot of challenges go beyond what teachers can address solely on their own.

You probably know the *golden rules*; you look after other people better if you look after yourself. That means staying hydrated, eating well, sleeping and taking exercise. Having a rewarding and valued job is also important. Keep in touch with friends and family - and remember as we teach the children that learning should be hard work, but fun, it is important for you to feel that way too. Find someone to talk to when you need to.

A whole school approach will mean that everyone's mental health and wellbeing is valued.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/mental-health-and-wellbeing-support-in-schools-and-colleges>

<https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/get-help/help-for-you/helpline/>



Education Support helpline offers free, confidential support for teachers and...

The Education Support helpline is available 24/7 for everyone working in education including teachers, support staff, lecturers, administrators and teaching...

OUR SUPPORT



Our team has a role to play in psychoeducation with teachers, families and young people and we are happy to deliver workshops that can include NGOs that specialise in literacy, social and emotional development.

We also have amazing students who can be supervised to run short interventions for dissertation topics inspired with one of the case studies or others. The evaluation of the intervention could inform family, community and school practice and policy.



NOTES



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The Developmental Psychology Research Group at Liverpool Hope University has a number of ongoing child development projects working with all communities

If you would like to get in touch with us to hear more about our work or would like us to run a community workshop please contact us



THANK YOU



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