



Welcome to the CELCIS Education Forum

**Supporting numeracy and
educational outcomes for
children and young people
with care experience**

February 2026

Webinar recording



CELCIS Education Forum: Supporting Numeracy and Educational Outcomes for Children and Young People with Care Experience

[Transcript](#)

Featuring:

Michael Bettencourt, Education Consultant, CELCIS

Professor Rose Griffiths, Professor of Education at the University of Leicester

[Michael Bettencourt](#)

Hello everyone, I'm going to make a start. We've got quite a packed agenda today and I'm keen to get started. I'd like to welcome you all to the first Education Forum of 2026. My name is Michael Bettencourt, and it's my pleasure to be facilitating today's session.

I'm just going to run through the structure for the day to give you an idea of what's coming. We're trying something slightly different to start off with as well. So, we're going to start off with an interview. I'm going to interview Rose to find out a bit about her background and understand the

drivers that brought her into academia. Then we're going to hand over the roles. She's got a PowerPoint presentation and she's going to present findings from her PhD research. And then we're going to end by handing over to you for discussion and questions. So that's three parts to today's session: that informal interview with Rose, the presentation of the research evidence, and then over to you. It is, as I said, going to be quite a tight session. So, we're asking people to use the chat for comments, to put your questions and answers in that function, and to upvote so that we have time at the end to pick up anything that we haven't had an opportunity to cover.

So I just wanted to start off by giving a little bit of context. I think it's fair to say that there's a long-standing tendency to attach greater emphasis to literacy than to numeracy. Reading and writing are often seen as shared and integrated across the curriculum, whereas maths is more likely to be viewed as a difficult subject or a subject that happens somewhere else by specialist staff. And this can limit the extent to which learners encounter numeracy and can contribute to lower confidence and persistence with maths for many children and young people.

And of course, for care-experienced learners, these challenges can be compounded by disrupted learning, changes in school, changes in home and the emotional demands of their life circumstances. So, when numeracy hasn't been prioritised or embedded, care-experienced learners might miss key building blocks in maths and come to see it as a subject that's closed off to them. In this context there's a clear need for evidence-based support that ensures numeracy is understood and that those children get those gaps filled.

The research on interventions that support care-experienced learners, in my opinion, tends to lean towards literacy, reading, and tutoring as well as social and emotional aspects of learning, with very little on maths. There is stuff on maths there, but not a lot, which is why I'm delighted that we're welcoming Rose today and that we're having this education forum, because I think it helps to fill that gap.

Rose Griffiths is an author of books for adults and textbooks. She's an author of books for children and I would say she's the pre-eminent expert on maths for care-experienced children. As well as being a teacher and an academic, she was a foster carer and a parent to adopted and birth children. Rose, I am delighted that you're here today. Thank you for

agreeing to speak with us. We've spoken a lot about the professional CV and if anybody wants to find out what you've done from a professional point of view, it's kind of easy to find that. But we had some really interesting conversations around what brought you into academia and we spoke about your parenting journey, which you said is in three parts. And I was just hoping that you could start this off by telling us a little bit about that first part of your parenting journey.

Rose Griffiths

Well, I think for anybody the first part of your parenting journey is how you were parented yourself. I grew up on a big council estate in South London with a mum and dad who'd ended up on that estate because they'd both been children bombed out of the houses that their families lived in. So, I think having both a very happy family but also one that knew how difficult life could be was a good starting point for me as a teenager and then a young woman.

I left school, went to work in a shop. I got married very young — probably a mistake — but both my husband and I then went on to work in places where we were in contact with a lot of children who were living in children's homes. He was a community and youth worker. I was a schoolteacher in an area where there was a Barnardo's home and I had three children from the Barnardo's home in my first class there as a tutor group. I was a secondary maths teacher, and we talked about the difficulties these kids have because they haven't got a family that stays with them. They're being moved about, nobody comes to parents evening and so on. It was also a period — talking about the 1970s to start with — when your local authority didn't have to have an adoption service. And I think it's been a change for the better that that is now the case; they're obliged to, in England at least. But there was a newspaper article — it was in the Observer. 'A Mother for Matthew'.

Michael Bettencourt

So, we've got a young couple who've just got married, moved from London to Leicester, and you read this article. What happened next?

Rose Griffiths

They suggested that if people were interested in, well it was really just babies who were considered at that moment, not babies of mixed heritage, not babies with siblings and trying to keep them together and so on - So, we wrote to the Adoption Resource Exchange, which existed

then, and they put us in touch with our local authority. And that led to us adopting our first child, our daughter Tanya. We fostered her from when she was about three and a half years old. She'd been adopted before — we were family number five I think — because the adoptive parents had changed their mind after they'd had her for a while.

And I think we were both extraordinarily naive. I mean, I thought, you know, I'm a teacher. I'm working with hundreds of kids each day in a secondary school — I'll have 30 kids and I can actually get them all to sit down at the same time. You know, it's quite miraculous. But then being thrown into here's a three-and-a-half-year-old who we were more or less left on our own with. There was no backup service at that point in terms of what do you do. She cried a lot, she screamed a lot, she argued a lot, she told us she only ever ate chocolate biscuits for breakfast. You know, at least there were little moments of humour.

Michael Bettencourt

You adopted at a time where there wasn't a lot of formal support and you kind of learnt it as you were going.

Rose Griffiths

Yes, and we survived because we'd got some very, very good friends who were very energetic and helpful, and at the very least would come round and mop your brow and tell you that they would talk to her for a bit and good family backing us up most of the time, although that was family at a distance because my family were all in London and mostly my husband's where as well. But we went for it again. And our son arrived with us when he was nearly two. Again, I think we were family number four for him.

We asked for a photo to see this little boy before we actually took him on, and the social worker said 'No, the foster carer said she's not going to take any photos of him because he's too ugly' — which she may have meant as a joke, but we said, right, OK, he's coming here then. That would be good. And for our daughter, it was an absolute turning point. All of a sudden, she was a big sister with a little boy who was more frightened than she was. And she could remember, she was only four, but she was an absolute turning point in making it possible for us to feel this was going to work. It was going to be harder work than we thought, it was going to be more challenging than we thought. We were out of our depth a lot of the time.

Michael Bettencourt

I know I've joked with you a couple of times, Rose, but you adopted two kids without support and it was challenging, and then – this is me unkindly saying that you did things the wrong way around – you then went on to have your birth children. So you have two birth children.

Rose Griffiths

Yes, that's right. And certainly with the first baby, the social worker who was looking after our Raf's interests – our son's interests was convinced that we might hand the adopted ones back now we'd had a baby. And we were – 'No, why would we do that? That's ridiculous'. I did once wake up in the night when the baby Owen was only about six weeks old at the most. He was in the carry cot next to me and I found I couldn't move my legs because Rafael, who was quite a heavyweight child, had sat on them. And for a few seconds I thought, oh blimey, the social worker was right – he's worried now that he's going to be handed back to somebody else that he can't remember. And I made the mistake of saying to him, 'Oh it's all right Raf, we're not going to send you back. You won't have to go back to the last family. You'll be staying here, we've got you forever'. And he looked at me absolutely appalled and said, 'I wasn't thinking that. I thought you had to send the baby away!' So, I explained that we didn't have to do either, actually. But it's that kind of thing – working with children who've not had what we might call a normal upbringing, realising that even the very littlest ones have got perceptions that their situation in what everyone is in.

Michael Bettencourt

And it is trying to understand and interpret what was going on for them. You've given us the first two parts of your parenting journey, and I wanted to move on to point three. There was a point where you had four kids sat on a sofa watching a television programme – I wonder if you could tell us where that led?

Rose Griffiths

Yes, I can't remember the name of the programme, but it was something like Find a Family and it was a little ten-minute programme. It was at the end of children's television and just before the news that they were running for a week. And we discovered that our four kids – the youngest was five and the oldest two were teenagers – had got a notebook and they were sitting there watching these films of children talking about what

they enjoyed doing. And they had written down things, like he's a supporter of whatever club, and they were basically making a shopping list of who was coming next.

So, my husband and I both agreed, you know, this is it. We've got four children, that's larger than my family had been. I have got two brothers, the same size as my husband's family had been. We'd said we wanted a largish family; this counted as a large family. So, we said to the kids, no, we weren't thinking of having any more children. You know, it'd be more expensive, you wouldn't have as much stuff, we wouldn't be able to go on holiday easily. We would all fit in the car, all of this kind of stuff. And the two younger ones said: is there something wrong with being adopted then? Why couldn't we have more adopted people in our family? And the older ones saying, well we're happy to share, we've got stuff. You can pass clothes down, it'll be fine. We'll help, we're big enough. We can hold children; we can give them breakfast. It'll be all right. So, we made it clear that it wasn't their choice, they weren't the ones who were going to decide whether or not we would have any more children, but we did think about it and came to the conclusion that yes, we could have another one. It would be fine. There were children out there who still needed families.

[Michael Bettencourt](#)

So you got in touch with, would it be the local authority?

[Rose Griffiths](#)

Yeah. And initially we were approved for one more child. And because we already had two mixed heritage children, mixed race children in our family, our eldest 2 adopted children, the black social workers group interviewed us as well and said, yes, this is fine, we can consider you for any of the children we've got. And then we were contacted again and asked was there any chance that we could consider two children because they had siblings that they didn't want to split up. And we by that time we'd already, we'd bought a van so we could get 8 people in at a time. [So we said](#) All right, then we'll go for that.

So we had to go through the process again, a slightly shorter one to check that out. And we were approved for two and then I had a phone call. I was head of maths at a local secondary school, big comprehensive. And I had a phone call during the day from our allocated social worker who said I've got a photo of some children I think you might be interested in, can I come round after school and show you the photo?

So she came round, she showed me the photo, it's got three children in it. And I said, I am a maths teacher, I can count. Which 2 was it you were thinking we might have. And she said, oh, well, those two are twins, so that doesn't really count. So, we thought you might be interested in having all three. And we said, I mean, we'd seen the photo, she knew her job. So we said yes, but we're going to need a lot of help and part of it's going to be financial because we're going to need cutlery, we're going to need chairs, we're going to need all sorts of stuff. And also, we we're not going through the adoption process again. If you, if you want us to have these, you're going to have to get this agreed for it, for it to be a placement for three straight away. And she said, yeah, I've already been told we could do that by the end of tomorrow.

Michael Bettencourt

Wow.

Rose Griffiths

So we took on our younger 3 partly because we both were under the illusion, and it is an illusion, that if you've taken a child who's been out on their own and not learnt to love anybody really, or has had that disrupted so many times, that maybe having three children together who had lived together, from what we were told all of the time, at least they would care for each other. What we hadn't realised was how often that actually wasn't the case. They were keen to be together, but they were actually rivals. Rather than support for each other. So again, it's hard to unravel.

Michael Bettencourt

So, you've described your parenting journey in those three parts. So you're head of maths in a secondary school, you've got 7 children and which I don't think you necessarily had - that wasn't the plan. But I suppose this leads us up nicely to how you fell into academia.

Rose Griffiths

Yeah. Well, the fact that I'd chosen to be a maths teacher had already been very useful because basically, when Tanya had come to us, I'd been able to give up work because I knew it was possible for me to get back into the workplace immediately if I wanted to. You know, somebody could ring me up and say 'We hear, you're a maths teacher, please can you be here by 11:00?' There's still such a shortage that it was a good profession to choose. And when we agreed to take on the three children, I got six weeks maternity leave, six weeks for having three more children. They

had all been at school or, or a day nursery, but they, they couldn't cope with carrying on with being at school all day. I mean, Sean was excluded almost immediately, aged five at that point.

And so I said to my head teacher, I need a job share or I need to go part time. And initially he said, no, we can't do that, we've got exam groups to manage. But a little bit later actually said, all right, you don't have to come in till 9:00. As a head of maths, I was expected to be in the school at 8:00 in the morning. You can't get, we couldn't get anyway, seven children out of the out of the house by then and sometimes we had to be at home.

So I started looking around for other work I might do because I felt while they're at school and also, we'd need the money. So, one of my friends saw an advert for a job at the university which he briefly considered and then rang me up and said you should look at this. So, I rang the university office, in the school of education and said I've a friend who's considering coming on a course. Can you tell me what time in the morning teaching starts? And the receptionist said 9:15 every day. And I thought this is the job for me and I wasn't sure they'd give it me because they actually wanted a primary person. But as it turned out, the interview process included a little bit of time with the head of department, who had seven children and the youngest one was adopted. And I don't think I got the job just because of that. I think my maths background was obviously useful, and I had got a master's degree as well.

[Michael Bettencourt](#)

So but if it wasn't for adoption, you wouldn't have applied for that job, and it wouldn't have begun.

[Rose Griffiths](#)

Yeah, yeah. I would have stayed in, I would have stayed in school. I would have gone part time for a few years and then tried to work my way back up. And my intention initially was I would go into the university and I would see it as a three- or four-year interlude and then I would move back into school life, because I enjoyed working with children and I enjoyed teaching maths in a way that was perhaps a bit different to some of the other maths teachers there were. And the university turned out to be much more flexible. Of course, also, my life plan of - things will calm down after three or four years with our bunch of children - as anybody who's done this will know, but we weren't quite aware of at that point, is that teenage years aren't that easy. At one point we had five teenagers, you know, I was in and out of work quite a lot at that point.

Michael Bettencourt

So there's something there about the importance of the flexibility of the workplace to be able to kind of manage life. I'm really conscious of the time, Rose, and I really appreciate everything that you have shared so far. And I'm sorry to make right like a jump to somewhere else, but in amongst everything else that you have done, you founded something called Letterbox. And I really wanted to our participants to hear about this. I'm not quite sure how somebody who's been a foster carer is holding down a full-time job and is raising 7 kids also manages to establish something that became significant. So, I wonder if you could just start off by telling us what Letterbox is and how it started.

Rose Griffiths

Yeah, I wasn't holding down a full-time job at the university forever. I only did that for the first two years and then I went half time for a good ten years or so and then back to full time now. So, the Director of Education approached the university after it was a fairly new director of education for Leicester City and said we need help because we've just looked at our results for children in care and compared them with our other results, which are not very good anyway. We've got lots of schools in special measures and we want somebody to do something about reading and children in care. And my head of department knew of the kind of interests I'd got because, because basically he was a special needs person and, and we'd had a lot of discussions. So, he said, oh, the person you need to talk to is Rose, but she won't talk to you just about reading. It's got to involve maths. And his plan was that I would think of some miraculous way of making sure that the teenagers they'd got at that point - so kids who were about to take their GCSEs - this was like January in one year. So, we need these kids to do better by May when they take their exams and you're in charge. And I said no, it's not possible because apart from anything else, I don't think it would work whoever was doing it. But it's more likely to make kids panic if you have only offered help at this point than earlier on. What we need to do is to look at what they're doing in primary school and have a longer-term plan. So, he agreed that what I could do was to think about something that would work with children aged 7 to 11. That would be maths and reading that had a budget initially in the thousands of pounds, but it turned out to be none at all. It was a time of great stress. And he said and it can't be something where you work with teachers because we're short of teachers. We don't want to frighten anybody off. Same with foster carers, can't be with foster

carers. Well, that leaves you with the most important people in the Triangle, teachers, foster carers, children themselves. And at one point my mum had enrolled one of my sons for a postal club called the Humpty Dumpty Club I think it was. And basically, the child got a brown envelope with a colouring sheet and some crayons in it and occasionally some stickers and a teeny weeny little storybook cartoon book once a month that came through the post to the child with their name on it. And I just thought, right, OK, let's do a postal club that's better than the Humpty Dumpty club. We'll only be able to do it for six months at a time because we haven't got a budget. And I've got to go around begging from book shops and people with big envelopes and all sorts of other stuff where I was able to persuade a few people in the local authority to join in. So the children's librarian, the person who was looking after the education of children in care, it wasn't the virtual school head at that point, it was before that. An Ed psych (educational Psychologist) and a very, very willing and helpful clerical worker who said I can fill parcels. We found a bookshop that would give us books at cost. I've got a number of sponsors and we set up this thing and because children would be getting a parcel that would come through their letterbox, we called it the Letterbox Club.

[Michael Bettencourt](#)

Fantastic. So, how big is Letterbox now? Because it's started as your local authority sending it out to a quite a modest number of kids and it's grown.

[Rose Griffiths](#)

Yes, 20 children. And we did four years of we carried it on in Leicester with 20 or 30 children each year. That gave me the chance. Again, the university was a good player in this in that it gave me the chance to collect reading and math scores show that it seemed to work well. Got a big grant from the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families, now the Department for Education) as they were there. Department for Education ran a pilot across the whole of England with 50-ish local authorities, thousand children for a couple of years, built a partnership with Book Trust so that they would take it over and run it from then on. They've got a warehouse, that was the key thing and they could do the reading bit and I'd written the maths games. This year we had over 10,500 thousand children who were members of Letterbox Club and they get 6 parcels a year. And there's more about it on the Book Trust website. So it's great.

And it's been running since 2003.

Michael Bettencourt

And I worked in a local authority where we had Book Trust and it was an absolute delight for children to get those, those packages. And I used to get letters thanking me even though I wasn't providing them. So I am going to ask that we pause there. Thank you so much, Rose.

We're going to bring up your PowerPoint and I'm going to hand over to you to do your, your formal presentation.

Rose Griffiths

OK. So probably everybody who's watching knows what a diverse group children in care are. But the key thing for me is to notice that children often have lower attainment than they could have had if they'd had a more settled life. In England, we're talking about 80,000 children, which is a major leap in the numbers. When I started in this work, we were talking about under 60,000 and we're now over 80,000.

And one of the things I was glad to be able to take part in was when John Prescott was Deputy Prime Minister and he set up a unit that was to look at why children who were in care who might live in the same street as another child who was on free school meals. So another child living in the same street but with a settled family going to the same school that they were still doing very, very much worse when it came to the scores that the country was collecting about maths and English. And it's because of course, we're faced by each child's past experiences and raising that issue at that time, I think it was 2003. It wasn't about anything other than all of these experiences that we know many children now, we realise are all leading to underachievement. In terms of bereavement, one of the things I particularly noticed after my husband died was that I suddenly became somebody who, you know, couldn't get a sentence out. I couldn't figure out what I needed to buy in Sainsbury's. All of a sudden, I became somebody who was much less competent than I normally had been. And partly I recuperated from that, because I'd had the life before where I had been a competent, sensible person who could remember things. And I think what we sometimes forget is for our children, they have had experiences that have resulted in that kind of change to their capacity to learn, their capacity to cope, their capacity to manage life generally. But they haven't been lucky enough to have the bit before that I had, where I had been a person who could do things. And that leads to the child themselves feeling: 'I'm just useless. I'm, I just can't do this. The only way I can cope is a way that people don't like by withdrawing, by being naughty' and so on. So the newer - I'm talking over decades, of course -

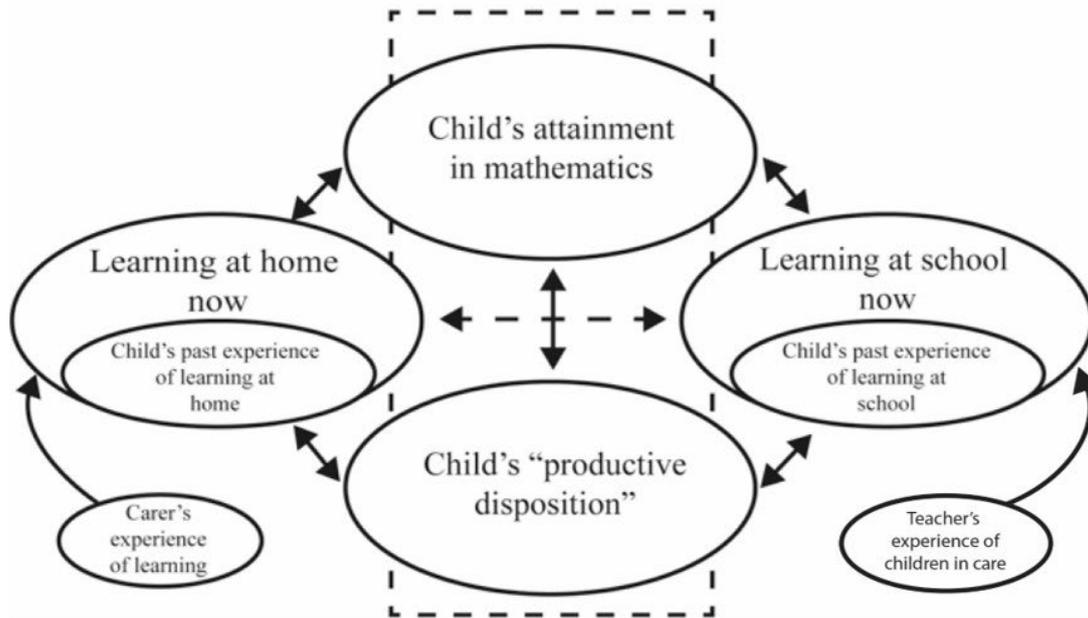
the newer emphasis on attachment, on loss, on trauma is really important. And I'm very glad to see that in every country in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.

The second point I wanted to make at this initial stage was just to say that it's not as easy to help a child who's had difficulties and has built up this kind of capacity for working in school that's not very high. It's not as easy to work with them to remediate their maths compared to a child who's had a more straightforward time in learning the things we need them to learn in maths. Part of maths is hierarchical and I sometimes imagine this. I'm not a great knitter and maybe none of you are, but if you were a person who did a lot of knitting, you'd know that working with wool that's just straight off the skein, that's brand new, straight and easy to knit with, that's very straightforward compared to trying to work with something that's all wiggly and knotted and got holes in it and you unravel it, you end up with wiggly wool and it's much harder to knit with that. So really what I'm saying is that we need the most expert teachers to be working with the child who has significant difficulties. It's harder than first teaching, but we do need first teaching. In other words, what everybody gets to start off with to be good as well.

My PhD gave me a chance to think about this altogether, to think about how do children in care end up in the low attainment levels that they do. And I'm not talking just about children at the bottom end of the scale of the attainment scale, but also those in the middle and in the top probably could have done better if they hadn't had the life situation that they had before. So what I did for my PhD was I enrolled and said I would do case studies of five children, all in that initial age range, that I'd been able to do so many years before, all in care, and that they would all be identified by their school as having major difficulties in maths. I worked with two different local authorities and I was a bit uncertain to start off with whether they'd be able to find children who were would fit this bill, and I was offered a kind of shortlist of about 30 odd children who were all labelled as the worst at maths in their whole year group by their schools and picked 5 out of that. My aim was to look at your every child's experience of doing maths at school and at home. And I wanted to follow them for at least a year. And because many children will change class teacher through the calendar year, I thought if I did it from January to December, that would probably in most cases give me two teachers experience of working with that child. And the second part of my study was to look for ways of improving the situation for other children with

care experience. It's tremendously important to look at what the child's doing at home alongside what the child's doing at school, in school, if you want to make any difference to the child's learning in maths.

Elements of child's learning in maths:



This is the diagram I came up with after a year or so of thinking I need to show how all these things link up and I need to show that it's complex, it's not straightforward, it's really quite difficult to cope with this. So I've separated out the child's attainment in maths in the top Oval there from the child's productive disposition. And I'll talk about the productive disposition in just a moment. But look on the right learning at school now that's obviously influenced by the child's past experience of learning at school, particularly if it's not been great. And it may not be much different whether they've been in different schools or whether they're in this school. It's different teachers each time, but their class teachers experience of children in care also influences what's going on there. And on the left-hand side, learning at home again, their past experience of learning at home effects what they'll do now. And the carers experience of learning whether they were successful at school also comes into it.

Productive disposition

“The habitual inclination to see mathematics as sensible, useful and worthwhile, coupled with a belief in diligence and one’s own efficacy.”

(Kilpatrick, Swafford and Findell, 2001)

**Some children have a
very unproductive disposition!**

Let’s look at Kyle’s experience ...

I’ll set the scene, then
we’ll watch film of him working with me.

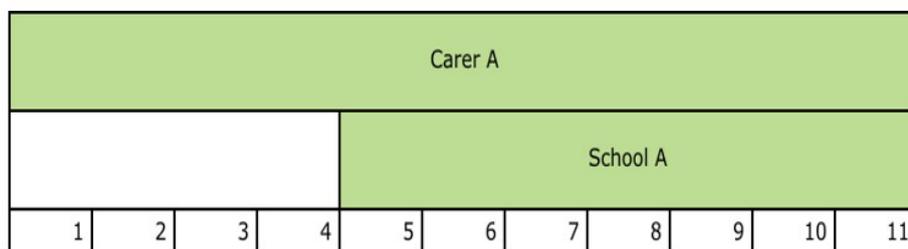
Productive disposition comes from an American piece of work where they were looking at all the different things that can contribute to a child doing well in maths and productive disposition - I think this is a wonderful definition. It's really helpful to think of for me to see maths as sensible, useful and worthwhile - and that of course comes down to the maths you're teaching - coupled with a belief in diligence and one's own efficacy. That's the bit that's under the child's control. But we can help with both of those things. And part of my message to teachers is you've got to think about whether this math seems interesting and enjoyable to the child that you're working with, and also you need to find ways of showing them that if they do concentrate, they can do better than if they run around shouting. And some children definitely have a very unproductive disposition that may well have been built up by the experience that school has given them before or by just their general feeling of life isn't something that I'm doing well at.

So we're going to look at one particular little boy. I've chosen him partly because he was one that taught me an awful lot. And I did actually end up following him for more than a year. It was nearly two years altogether because his experience was to start off with at the extreme end of what a child might cope with in school. So let's set the scene for that and then

we're going to watch some film of him working with me. I do like a nice diagram and this one I invented just so that I could look at each child's experience and compare what they were doing, what was happening to them in terms of home and what was happening in terms of school. Just to look at where are places where disruption is happening, where you would want to put in particular extra help.

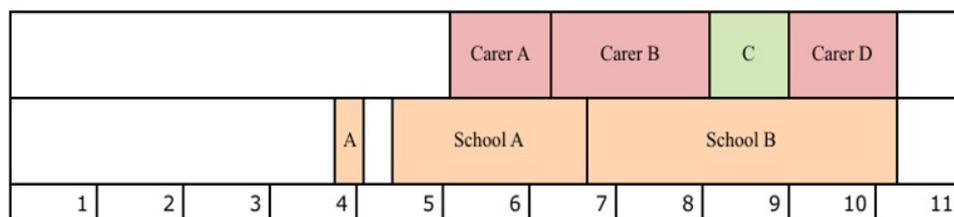
Children's timelines...

- For an average child, a typical timeline would be:



So, for an average child, for one of my birth children, for example, the top line of the diagram is they've stayed with the same family. The bottom line of the family of the diagram is they started school at age 4 and they were still at the same school and the numbers along the bottom of their age.

Timeline for Kyle



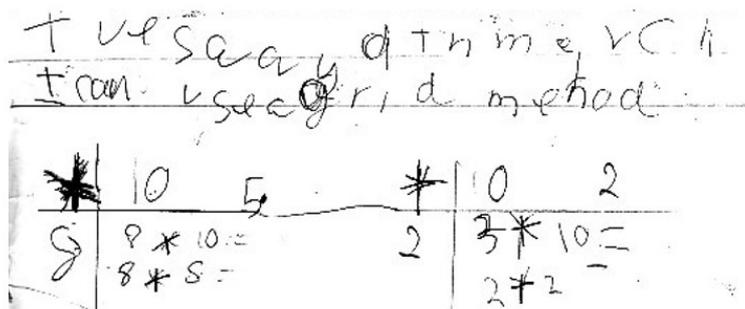
Here's Kyle's timeline. The first 2 bits are white because I didn't know what was happening there, but he was presumably with his birth mother in each of those pieces. And you look at the top line and see his care record at age 5 and a tiny bit he's taken into care. But if you look at the line underneath his school experience, he'd already been excluded from

school aged 3 3/4 for some months and then had a gap where he was just with his birth mum at home and then he'd started back in the school that hadn't been able to manage with him in the first place. So, he'd been at the first school, he'd been with the first foster carer during the time he was in at the first school, he'd swapped over to carer B. He was then placed for adoption. That's where the 'C' is. It's in green because that was meant to be permanent. But unfortunately, that foster carer died and he was then moved to a kinship carer who was struggling to know whether she would manage. And I met him at the point where he was 9 and he had recently moved back with this foster carer.

Kyle in class...

Works slowly, often refuses to write anything, wandering, badly behaved, frequently sent out.

Never copies.



Let's look at his work. This is just one piece I've picked out. He worked really slowly. He wouldn't write without being bullied into it really. He used to get up and walk around. He was badly behaved. He started fights. He was frequently sent out. He spent a lot of time in the corridor on his own or sitting outside the heads office. But the one thing I realised was he never copied, he never took what some children would see as the easy way out and just seeing what answer somebody else would put and write it down. He didn't. But he's nine. Look at his writing, look at what he's trying to do that he doesn't even, he can't even read what that says. It actually is talking about you doing multiplication using a grid method. So I did an assessment with him, which we'd used when we were doing the research for the Letterbox Club, which was a very basic one, where I did some counting. I had a little box of pennies so I could ask the children that I was working with to count how many pennies I was giving them. Kyle couldn't easily count and I think it was about 12 pennies I gave him

and he couldn't count 12 without starting again, going really slowly. He wasn't sure what he was doing there. He'd done a little set of addition sums that were all with numbers under 10, with totals under 10. And one of the ones he couldn't do was seven add 0. And his number facts memory was really, really poor.

VIDEO

A video is shown where Rose Griffiths and Kyle work with numbers. Using toy fish and a drawing of two ponds, Rose and Kyle work through counting how many fish are in each pond, how even if you move the fish between the ponds, the overall number stays the same and how adding zero to a total doesn't change the number of fish. Kyle is sometimes distracted by the camera but comes back to the task and at the end, he is able to solve simple addition sums which feature the numbers and ideas they have just been talking about. More information can be found in chapters 4 and 5 here:

<https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/items/b9cb7026-2922-42e5-82c2-2ba778f9f637>

So what I was doing there is called a clinical interview. It's where you start with something that you know the child doesn't know and you try and work towards that, not necessarily starting with that thing. What I was doing with Kyle, I wanted to see if I could get him to the point where he knew for certain that $0 + 7$ was 7. But there wouldn't be any point in just going straight for, 'Well, it's seven. You can see it's seven'.

We needed to go through a kind of pattern of seeing what worked with other things and doing it both with physical equipment and patience meant that he could feel, 'Yeah, I agree, $0 + 7$ is 7', but that's not enough because he's got to know that $7 + 0$ is 7 and all sorts of other things make 7. So it gives you the chance, as somebody who's teaching maths, to kind of figure out an experiment with the child alongside you. Notice how quickly, because I'd written out the questions, he could then write down the answers. Scribing is such an important thing for teachers or teaching assistants to do for a child who's finding writing difficult. We need some time where they're concentrating on the maths, not concentrating on how they write this and how long it's going to take them. Certainly, using counting equipment that has got a context. The

goldfish, the little fish were so attractive. Kyle wanted to have a go with them. And what was really lovely for me was you'll see a bit more of him in video in a moment. But at the end of the video, finally I'd said to him, well we've got about 10 minutes left till you have to be back in class, what would you like to do? And he wanted to watch his film. And as he watched his film, he talked me through it. Oh, well, you can see when I'm leaning back like that with my arms back, that means I'm really pleased with myself. There were all sorts of bits that his class teacher had said to me about him. He's always off task. He's always doing something else. He's always messing about. You have to keep saying to him, oh, stop messing about, Kyle, otherwise he doesn't stop. But actually, I think you have seen during that little bit of film, he actually came back on task by himself. I didn't need to say anything; I just needed to be patient and to acknowledge that he needed to do something else in between his thinking. So basically, I've got a bag full of stuff on the floor next to me and where we just stopped was him having given me the sum $100,000$ add $100,000$ makes $200,000$. The next little bit of film we're going to watch what happens when he gives me a harder sum to do so we'll move back into the video.

Just before we move back, so I've talked about most of this, but several strategies to solve the same problem. So, using the fish, using your fingers, thinking in your head, writing something down, all of those are important. You should be doing all of them. Asking the children to pose problems is important, you learn a lot more about what they can do. And if you want them to learn a number fact, they're going to have to do it lots of times.

VIDEO

A video is shown where Rose Griffiths and Kyle working with numbers. Kyle writes out a sum for Rose to solve which has 10 zeros. Rose solves the sum but isn't sure how to say it – 20 thousand million. Kyle suggests doing the sum on the calculator and is able to use it easily. However the calculator only has room for 8 numbers on the screen. Rose asks Kyle to solve $124+0$ in his head which he does. He then confirms that on the calculator. He then does $124-0$ on the calculator. He then completes another sum with $362+0$.

More information can be found in chapters 4 and 5 here:

<https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/items/b9cb7026-2922-42e5-82c2-2ba778f9f637>

So the importance of children knowing that it's OK to make mistakes, I think is one of the things that is really, really valuable. And the fact that I couldn't remember how many million there were in a billion and couldn't manage with that long number with 10 noughts on and that I was going to check it, but that I was happy to say I have no idea. It might not be. I could have got it wrong - Important.

The use of the calculator was really important because it gave me a chance to see does Kyle know how to write three hundred and sixty two? Does he know that it means 362? The fact that he'd got that he was so familiar with using a calculator wasn't to do with school, actually. He'd been a member of Letterbox Club the year before, so he'd got a calculator at home, which according to his kinship carer, he used quite a lot. And so that's another medium to use with children, as many different ways as you can to find ways of looking at what the child's doing.

So my conclusions; teachers definitely need a better understanding of the effects of the child's life experience. One of the teachers that Kyle had had, she wasn't inexperienced with what children in care might have gone through. If anything, she was kind of burnt out and she was just tired of it all. And she went for kind of repressive measures. Like if he, if he's getting distracted, then I need to keep shouting at him or telling him he's got to concentrate better instead of just giving me a little rest. The main thing that every child needs is time with a teacher because they've got to build a relationship with somebody that who is who is patient with them, who is interested in them. I think the fact that I had said to all of the five children that I work with and with a number of other children since then, the fact that I've said I want to find out more about your maths, it might help you with your maths. But the main thing is we're trying to find out things that would, it would help other teachers to know about for how you perceive maths teaching. We need time with a teacher leading to good assessment, and that's not easy to do, and you can't do it with a paper test. The whole of this video was about me having a chance to watch the video again so that I could see things that I hadn't really noticed first of all, that I could put down things that were positive about things he could do, but also about things he couldn't do or he was uncertain about and

paying attention to the child's avoidance techniques in the case. Well, there were none at this point.

Family is sometimes doing more than school. When Kyle moved school, well, he moved school as a result of me showing the video to the head teacher of the school he was already in and just being able to then show the video to one of the Educational Psychologists, who then immediately said he's dyslexic, I need to come in and do that with him. And he was happy to come for her to come in on the basis of I've seen your work and, you know, I think the problem here might be with your ability to read that you're dyslexic.

What next with this work? I'm working with two colleagues, one who's based at the university in Nottingham, one who's at UCL in London. And we're hoping that we may be able to get some funding to do a project to produce professional development material that any teacher who's working with a primary aged child in care and wants to do better with their maths could then use either through their virtual school or through other colleagues locally. So collecting together examples of video with notes to go with them as well. I do think it was important for my research here that the children knew that this research was to help other children. I think it gave me an opening with those children in the same way as it did when I went round to the foster carers that I could genuinely say I was a foster carer for many years and adoptive parent and this is where I'm coming from. I know how hard it is at times.

Materials for children and teachers

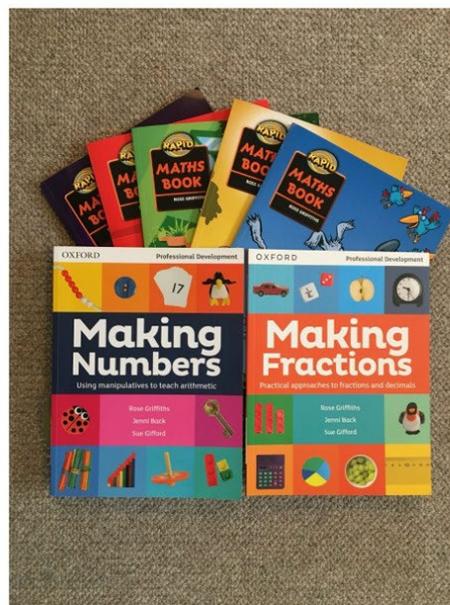
Rapid Maths (Pearson)

Making Numbers (OUP)

Free animations and short films: Register for OxfordOwl on Teachers' section, then click on 'Mathematics' then 'Making Numbers.'

Letterbox Club

See the BookTrust website.



There's a few of the books that I've worked on. Particularly to mention Making Numbers, which I worked with two other colleagues, one at Cambridge, one at Roehampton, where we were able to put together what we felt was a more interesting way of presenting maths right from very early counting through to initially just work with whole numbers in the Making Numbers book and then looking at fractions, including common fractions and decimals. So those two books together we feel are a good way for a teacher who's uncertain, perhaps because they've got a child like Kyle who's only working with numbers to 10 as far as they could see. And they're actually a Year 5 or a older aged teacher, looking at what comes before, what comes after and thinking about ways of using practical activity alongside written activity, activity with a calculator and so on. And the series at the back, Rapid Maths was one I wrote just before Letterbox Club came out and it we've gone through, I think we're on, I don't know, version three or something like that. But those pupil books might be quite useful with children who are below average attainment in their classes. Oxford has also got some free animations and some little films, including of me and my 2 colleagues explaining various bits and pieces that were in making numbers.

References

Ginsburg, H. (1997) *Entering the child's mind: the clinical interview in psychological research and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kilpatrick, J., Swafford, J. and Findell, B. (2001) *Adding it up: helping children learn mathematics*. Washington: National Academy Press.

And then last slide is just references to Herbert Ginsburg, absolutely delightful man who I was lucky enough to meet after I'd already started using his ideas of the clinical interview. You can use it in any subject area.

It didn't have to be maths, but maths was the one where I used it. And then Kilpatrick and Co were the American academics who had looked at positive disposition and what you might do about that.

[Michael Bettencourt](#)

Thank you so much, Rose. That was really interesting. I've got some reflections that I'm going to share. I'm going to ask if we can open up and unmute people so that they can ask you questions if they want to or to make any reflections or observations. But just whilst we're doing that, Rose, this is kind of my feedback from listening to you, which may prompt people to ask questions of their own. I really like your idea about the need for the most experts to support children who've got gaps. I think sometimes there's an assumption that if a child has a gap, it's an easy thing to fill, that you have a one off lesson or you kind of go look, there's a gap in this area of maths and we're just going to fill it up simplistically... I loved your definition of productive disposition being sensible, useful and worthwhile. And I wonder whether there's something about maths that adults do as well, where we don't see maths as being sensible, useful or worthwhile. We tend to part of our culture is to say I'm no good at maths; I'm no good at counting. Maths is not my strong suit. And I don't think we say that about literacy. I again, I've just loved the, the usefulness of the timeline as a visual representation of where children have lived or where children have gone to school. I think it's such a useful tool for any practitioner whether you're from a social work background and education background to just begin to understand what might be going on for a child to give them that contextual information.

It was lovely watching Kyle and having a reminder of the importance of physicality and movement as a way of counting and, and how he really needed those physical prompts that he can interact with. My next observation was just around the scaffolding and the pace that he needed. And you said that you were patient with him. And it was very clear in that video that this was a kid who needed patience. And I think we can all see, particularly those of us who've been teachers, how that can easily be squeezed out in a busy classroom that we don't have the resource or the time to give. He needed space and you gave him space to be able to learn. And then lastly, I just wanted to say make mistakes. We should all be allowed to make mistakes. And again, that's not something that we hammer home to our children or even to ourselves. So thank you for that.

We've got a question. How or does your work with the Letterbox Club influence the way you think about supporting children like Kyle in maths and reading?

Rose Griffiths

How? I think the key thing for me about Letterbox Club is that in the majority of cases the parcels that are addressed to the child and what I hope is that people make it clear to the child, it's up to them, it's their stuff. Each Letterbox Club parcel usually holds, and we've got 5 different age ranges now. So, the parcel will have a couple of books in it and the books are largely chosen by interest age of the child that it's being sent to, rather than trying to match reading ages, because reading ages doesn't really work in terms of something you're doing as a choice at home. I think we've always tried to remember that if the child it, it was what I was saying earlier on, you know, that triangle of people. I, that first go with letterbox club when the director of education said, 'Here, this is what we want you to do'. My first thought as a teacher would have been I need to do something with teachers. And my second thought as a parent was, or I need to do something with foster carers and the actually, I should have thought of it the other way round anyway. If you want, if you want to make a difference to how the child sees their attainment, how they see the importance of education, they're the person you've got to start with. You've got to show them that they can do it. It may be, it may feel difficult to start off with, but I mean, these little bits of video I felt was so helpful. First of all, maybe in making the child feel important, but also then in making them think, what can I do? But then the evidence from what they were doing at home - the calculator - because he'd got one of his own, he'd been doing stuff with that. I'm rambling a bit now.

Michael Bettencourt

No, no, I think what you're pointing out to me, there was something that was demonstrated, there was that sense of a triangulation because he had received a package that had a calculator. So, he was using it. Foster carers and adopters who get the letterbox are also seeing it coming in. So, you're putting the resources in there in the context of a safe setting. So, it's not somebody saying I'm coming to teach you. They're there for them to, to use with. So, there's something about his familiarity in the triangulation.

Rose Griffiths

Yeah. And certainly, me being a parent, I realised how much I hated homework. What I didn't want was more homework. There's been a lot of

studies into it. And of course, some homework is really useful, but some work, some homework doesn't get the value given to it even when the child has done it, school doesn't reflect on that and what we need sometimes, at the end of the day - one of my thoughts always has been that children seem to get younger as the day goes on. They, they might start off age 9 and by teatime they're 3, you know, they've become much more demanding and unfortunately the grown-ups around them, you know, I might have started off, I'm not obviously, but I might have started off at 45. But by the end of the day, I'm 102. We're heading in different directions. We've got to bear in mind, with Letterbox Club in particular, it's bearing in mind that after school children are tired, grown-ups are tired. We're all in need of something that is relaxing, interesting, that doesn't take too long. So again, with the maths games in Letterbox Club, I've been rewriting them this year. We've done a big review. So, all the games that go in for the next year for the younger three age groups will have been done and then the other two are ready for next year as well. And none of the things that we suggest children do will take very long because as a foster carer, I definitely, I didn't want to play Monopoly. I'd be there for days. I want something that you can do for 5 or 6 minutes and then if you've enjoyed it, you can do it again. And I think that's the kind of line we're looking at.

[Michael Bettencourt](#)

Absolutely. And I think as foster carers and adoptive parents often know that homework can become a source of friction and tension. And like you say, at the end of a long day, it's the last thing that anyone wants to do. I'm just going to put another question to you, Rose, that I'm looking at the questions. What should teachers look for when a child seems off task but may still be thinking and learning? I like the way you approach the work with Kyle. How can teachers create similar chances for other children?

[Rose Griffiths](#)

I don't think it's always easy to do. I think the point where you intervene is if the child is preventing someone else from working. During that interview with Kyle, obviously I was sitting next to him. So, I was in a position where I could just hold my intervention, just kind of join in with him. And as you can see, he, he didn't need telling to come back. If you left him, he would do it himself. He obviously was still thinking about things while he was while he was doing whatever else he was doing, moving fish about or whatever. But with other children I've worked with, I have needed to intervene quickly because what they're doing isn't... It's

the whole thing of getting to know the child. I can't give you one answer. It's going to be different for different children, isn't it?

Michael Bettencourt

But I think, I think what resonated for me a little bit there is sometimes there is a temptation to intervene and sometimes the right approach might be to just pause and allow the child thinking space there. I'm just looking at another comment which is kind of related. I'm not sure if it's a question but I just wanted to share it. Our 8-year-old refuses to do any work at home and masks heavily at school, for the sake of our relationship, we've put academics on the back burner. Have you any experience of this in your personal life? He will read when he chooses to but never does any homework. Rose, we've had many conversations about this. I do not do homework with my 11-year-old. And I'm an educationalist and I'm saying it out publicly. Can we make anonymous feel OK about this?

Rose Griffiths

Oh yeah. One of my daughter's once, the homework, she was set, she, I think she was 12 or 13. So it was secondary school homework, and it was for design technology. And she, she suddenly said it must have, she was already in her pyjamas ready to go to bed. And she suddenly said, oh, I've got to give him my DT homework tomorrow morning. So I said, OK, what have you done for it? And she said I haven't done it yet, I'll do it now. Have you got a metre of cow fabric? What?

And apparently it was to make a small bag out of something out of fabric. And she's asking me at 10:00 at night, have I got a metre of cow fabric? And she seriously thought that she could whip up a bag between then and going to bed and take it in the following morning. I mean, that is so frustrating.

So I of course, what I said was, of course I have. And she said, oh, thank goodness for that. And I thought, sarcasm doesn't really help, does it? It's not going to do the job.

I think we have to acknowledge that homework can feel really hard. I think we have to be more forthcoming with teachers about you probably don't understand how difficult this can be. I will and to say I will do other things with my child that I know are going to benefit them. I also think we shouldn't just abandon the academic stuff though. I mean, as a foster carer, sometimes I'd ask about what's this child we were having because we had a couple of foster care children for short term fostering. One once

over a summer holiday, for example. And I would say, you know, what's their reading like? What's their maths like? I lost track of how many social workers said to me, oh, we're not bothering about that at the moment. We're going to wait till they're settled. And as I've said to you before, Michael, you could wait till they're 45 before they're settled. You can wait forever before they're settled. It's not a reasonable tactic to wait till they're settled. What you have to do is find ways of making the reading and maths progress, be part of helping them become more settled. I know if a child starts to feel, oh actually I could do this, they'll feel more settled. Kyle, you know, the first couple of minutes that I had with him wasn't filmed partly because we were walking along a corridor being accompanied by a teaching assistant who was trying to make sure he didn't kick me. And it's part of being more relaxed and being more assertive at the same time with schools. And I hope that's one of the things, if we do manage to get some professional development material put together that we can say to schools, you have to be realistic here. You have to not have kids in detention at secondary school, which I know is still happening quite often because they haven't done their homework. You have to think about was that homework really worth it? Was there something else the child had been better doing?

Michael Bettencourt

Absolutely. And I think the message that you're given there is not to abandon the academic side of things, but to maybe find a different way. And if you can't do homework with your child, it might be that somebody else can do the homework. Or the abandoning of homework might be the right thing for you now because it's causing so much tension because of the relationship you have with the child.

I think I'm going to take one more question because we are coming up to 11 O'clock and I've got a question from Katie McVeigh who's seen I'm working with a child who has misplaced confidence in maths, is sure he has every question right despite having a very limited ability and talking round in circles. Have you any advice about how I may approach working with him to help him to see his own understanding and gaps?

Rose Griffiths

I think the calculator is going to be a start, particularly if you're doing number work, getting a child to do something, giving them the chance to do something, not just pencil and paper, not just in their head, but also with stuff like you saw there with Kyle with those fish. By the way, I ended up having to buy more and more fish because children kept

stealing them or would actually upfront say I want some of these. The thing about using a calculator at the moment, the position in English schools is that in primary level people are supposed to be concentrating on pencil and paper methods. We're waiting for a review of the national curriculum that I hope will bring the calculator back to the right place. I think if you've got a child, for example, who can't see that 2 fish and three fish makes 5 fish, then you need them to be able to move those things about and see what are all the combinations of numbers that you can use to make five. They need to be able to count to 5. They need somebody watching them, listening to them, seeing where they're going wrong. And the person who's doing that needs to be more knowledgeable about what are the key aspects of learning to count. And that's where I'd guide the grown up to Making Numbers - our book. We've tried really hard to make sure that you're looking at what does the child need to know? What am I supposed to look out for? How can I do this? Give me a couple of ideas of practical stuff I can use, ways I can write about it, but combining what's 1 fish, add 4 fish said out loud but done with fish, and then saying now do it on the calculator. The child has to look for the number one. They've got to look for the add sign. They've got to look for the four. They've got to look for the equals. They've got to press the equals. And then the number on the screen needs to be read. They need to see that it comes to 5. So that backs up what you're doing with the real stuff and that you're doing out loud and that eventually the child will be able to do on their fingers or in their head or by writing it down. The calculator is your friend. Kids love pushing buttons. So do I.

[Michael Bettencourt](#)

I think that's a good place to end. Thank you very much, Rose. I'm going to bring the Education Forum to a close now, our time is up. It's coming up to 11:00 and we may turn into pumpkins if I don't finish by 11. Just a reminder to participants today, you're going to get a bundle after today's session, and I'll just go through the list to let you know about that will include Rose's PowerPoint presentation. There will be links to the books for children, a link to her literary agency, and the maths textbooks. You will be able to get access to her PhD and I believe she recommends that you read Chapter 4. Rose?

[Rose Griffiths](#)

Kyle appears in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 both look at all five children that I've looked at. But in the index at the front it

will tell you which pages so you can read more about what I did with him and what I made of it.

[Michael Bettencourt](#)

OK, so there will be a link to the PhD chapter 4 and five, perhaps the most useful, feel free to read the whole thing. And there will be information on letterbox. And so I think all that remains for me to do is to say thank you very much. I want to thank my colleagues from CELCIS in the background, Michelle, Amy and Laura, who make stuff happen and make sure that things run really smoothly. That's really appreciated. And of course, thanks to you, Rose for sharing stuff about your professional and personal life and how the how they're intertwined and your passion for care experienced young people.

You've lived with them, you've worked with them, you've supported them, and I think it was just encapsulated in the video. It was lovely to see a little vignette of you teaching and good teaching in practise.

And I want to thank our attendees for coming along today. Thank you so much. Have a good morning and enjoy the rest of your day.

Thank you.

© CELCIS 2026