PICTURED ABOVE: THE ACORNS LOGO   DECEMBER 2020

About us

The Autism Community Research Network @ Southampton [ACoRNS] is an education-focused initiative which seeks to improve the lives of autistic children and young people. It is a collaboration between Education and Psychology at the University of Southampton and local nurseries, schools and colleges who are interested in developing, researching, understanding, and sharing good practice in educational provision for autistic children and their families. The network is co-directed by Professor Sarah Parsons, from the University's Education School, and Dr Hanna Kovshoff from the School of Psychology in partnership with our Steering Group who you can read about on our website.

ACoRNS News

New ACoRNS funding
Dr Hanna Kovshoff and Professor Sarah Parsons have won £10k funding to support the impact of ACoRNS research on an innovative project funded by the University of Southampton's ESRC impact acceleration account.

Student creating a logo.

'Creating comic books in collaboration with autistic students to support the transition from primary to secondary school' is a project designed to enhance the well-being and resilience of autistic children, families and schools in their educational transitions. We plan to work with young autistic students to co-create 4 short comics based on research of children's transition experiences. The project is a partnership with staff and students from New Forest School, and Sam Davies, a graphic novelist. We will update you on this project as it progresses!

Professor Sarah Parsons and Dr Hanna Kovshoff have also won £135k funding from the ESRC as part of a call for projects to develop innovative methods. *'Our Stories…': co-constructing Digital Storytelling methodologies for supporting the transitions of autistic children* is a collaboration with Professor Nicola Yuill at the University of Sussex, and local community partners. The project will start in February 2021 and run for 12 months. There will be research posts advertised for the project so please get in touch if you are interested in knowing more.

ACoRNS webinar
The Autism Community Research Network @Southampton (ACoRNS) held another Festival of Social Science event this year: *'Digital transitions: learning from lockdown for the future'*. The webinar, chaired by Professor Sarah Parsons took place on 13th November, with just over 200 people registering and 97 able to join us live. This was a great chance to hear about the important research done with Digital Stories during lockdown to support the assessments of children for their Education, Health and Care Plans and the transitions of older students with

complex needs beyond school. The link to the recording of the session can be found here : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2 WjuTDe-oQ&feature=youtu.be. Please contact us if you would like a Digital Delegate Pack from the day. More information about the presentations from the event are included as our main story on pages 3-4.

New ACoRN@Sussex launched!

We are delighted that our sister ACoRN@Sussex was formally launched on October 21st 2020 with a live Zoom event attended by over 70 people.

ACoRN@ Sussex is led by Professor Nicola Yuill (Psychology) and Dr Jacqui Shepherd (Education) at the University of Sussex.

Sharing the same core principles of participatory and creative methods for addressing research questions that matter to practice, the ACoRN@Sussex includes steering group members from education, health and social care, and already has some amazing projects running. More information can be found on their website.

We are very much looking forward to seeing how the ACoRN@Sussex continues to grow and working closely on our shared agendas and interests!

ACoRNS members invited to join 'Birth to 5 matters' working group

Kathryn Ivil from founding ACoRNS partner Aviary Nursery, and Sarah Parsons have been invited to join the working group for special educational needs and disability for *Birth to Five Matters.* Established by the The Early Years Sector Coalition, the working groups will develop new non-statutory guidance for the EYFS by revising and updating the popular *Development Matters* guide. More information about the development of the guidance can be found here: https://www.early-education.org.uk/birth-to-five-matters

Kathryn Ivil and Sarah Parsons have been invited to join the working group for special educational needs and disability for Birth to Five Matters.

New funded PhD opportunity

Applications are now open for a fully funded studentship awarded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership (SCDTP) commencing in the 2021/22 Academic Year: '*Falling through the gaps? Investigating the experiences of autistic young people within Care and Education Treatment Reviews'.*

There is an urgent need to research the views and experiences of autistic young people with learning disabilities accessing local health and social care services in order to improve services and outcomes. This community-based project is a collaboration between ACoRNS and the Care and Education Treatment Reviews (CETR) team for Hampshire, IOW, Portsmouth and Southampton. We aim to develop and research creative methodologies for accessing the views of autistic young people with complex needs and develop a strengths-based approach for informing and improving services based on those views. For more details and how to apply see: https://jobs.soton.ac.uk/Vacancy.aspx?ref=SCDTP-S2104 The deadline for applications is **Monday 18th January 2021.**

Introducing…

Hello, I am Verity and I'm a 3rd year iPhD student in Southampton Education School. My research is a collaboration with Fairmead School, which is a special school for autistic students and students with moderate learning difficulties. My research is about the learning that happens during projects which design technologies with, not just for, autistic young people.

In recent years those specialising in the design of technologies for autistic people have made increasing efforts to involve them in the design process through participatory design approaches. In doing so, they move away from deficit-focused thinking and value the knowledge and contribution which autistic people can make to their designs. However, researchers often encounter tensions between their desire to value autistic peoples' contributions and objectives for the technological output of the projects.
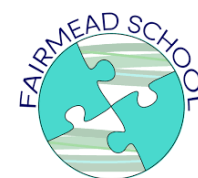
Verity is working with Fairmead school fer her PhD project.

My research builds on calls by Parsons and Cobb (2014) to focus on the effects of participatory design as a process rather than only on the technological outputs. Rather than planning for specific outputs, my research aims to explore the mutual learning which can occur between adults and autistic young people when collaborating on participatory design projects.

My first study involves running a computer game design project at Fairmead School, with the help of some local industry representatives. In doing so, we aim to investigate how such projects can influence people's expectations for the future employment of young autistic people, according to the different roles they play in the project.

Summaries of ACoRNS research

Here we include summaries of published research from the ACoRNS team. Please get in touch if you would like copies of any of these papers.

Amber Warren, Kate Buckingham & Sarah Parsons (2020) Everyday experiences of inclusion in Primary resourced provision: the voices of autistic pupils and their teachers, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, **DOI:** 10.1080/08856257.2020.1823166

Resourced provision is an important model for inclusive education, one that could be argued to provide the 'best of both worlds' of special and mainstream provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs. Typically, resourced provision means that pupils split their time between specialist and mainstream classes, gaining balanced support that is highly valued by parents. However, there is little research about resourced provision from the perspectives of the pupils.

The paper reports on a small-scale study that explored how children and teachers experience resourced provision and manage the daily transitions between activities and classes. A qualitative visual storyboard methodology was co-created between the researchers and school staff. This was used to explore what five 9 to 11-year-old pupils on the autism spectrum thought about their everyday experiences, including transitions between special and mainstream classes. Six staff members from the resource base were also interviewed. The storyboard method was found to be a simple and adaptable approach that can enable children to share their views in research and practice.

The findings showed the importance of friendship and peers; where and how support was provided; tensions between structured and unstructured periods; and student/school identity. Encouragingly, the school has implemented changes to how daily transitions are supported in response to pupils' views, with positive impacts on practice.

Parsons, S., Ivil, K., Kovshoff, H. & Karakosta, E. (2020) 'Seeing is believing': exploring the perspectives of young autistic children through Digital Stories. Journal of Early Childhood Research. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X2095 1235

Young autistic children are amongst the most scrutinised and assessed in their everyday lives, often leading to characterisations and descriptions that focus on their difficulties and challenges rather than on their abilities, strengths and positive experiences. Consequently, much discussion about autistic children tends to forget that they are children first. While research has considered the transitions of autistic children from primary to secondary school, and from secondary to post-compulsory contexts, there is almost no research focusing on transitions for young autistic children from nursery to primary schools. There is also very limited representation of their voices and experiences being explored, promoted, and valued directly as evidence in their own right. We aimed to address this gap through a project funded by the Froebel Trust and co-constructed with practitioners and families. The project used an innovative Digital Storytelling methodology to explore the experiences and perspectives of five 4-year-old autistic children, and their families, as the children prepared to make the transition from an inclusive day nursery to primary school. This paper provides an overview of the rationale, methodology, and findings of the project to address two related questions: How do we listen to those children who 'have no words'?; and what do we learn from them when we do?

Digital transitions: learning from lockdown for the future

Our third ACoRNS ESRC Festival of Social Science event took place virtually on November 13th 2020 and was a great opportunity to share some of the learning from our research during COVID constraints. Out first talk was by Dr Henry Wood and Kathryn Ivil about their ongoing work at Aviary Nursery in Eastleigh which has created and applied our Digital Storytelling approach to support young children's assessments and transitions. Stephanie Lewis, one of our trainee Educational Psychologists, and Kirsty Marsden, Speech and Language therapist from Hill House School in Lymington, gave our second talk focusing on the transitions of young people with complex needs.

Using Digital Stories for assessments and transition planning for autistic preschool children

'I am…' Digital Stories are short videos designed to provide holistic, strengths-based representation of children through enabling them to contribute their own perspectives. This contrasts with written reports and formal assessments, which often focus on a child's difficulties and challenges. Digital Stories may be particularly useful during periods in which professionals, such as educational psychologists, are unable to physically visit settings (e.g., during COVID-19 lockdowns) or spend time getting to know a child. This aim of this project, funded by the University of Southampton's ESRC Impact Acceleration Account, was to evaluate the use of Digital Stories in two contexts: (1) being shown at the beginning of person-centred planning meetings designed to support the transition of young autistic children from nursery to primary school and (2) as a tool to support educational psychologists conducting Education, Health, and Care Needs Assessments

(EHCNAs) for preschool children during COVID-19.

Different stakeholders, including parents and carers, nursery practitioners, special educational needs coordinators (SENCos) and educational psychologists provided feedback on their views of the Digital Stories. Four person-centred planning transition meetings were also filmed, so we could include comments made during these meetings.

Stakeholders told us that viewing Digital Stories has had direct and positive impacts on their practice, such as feeling more confident to contribute to transition meetings and helping educational psychologists represent the views of the child within reports, generate targets and support strategies, develop their formulate psychological understanding, and led to them asking parents and carers more personalised questions. For example, one educational psychologist said:

The psychological perspective seemed to flow a bit easier. The child's views came a bit easier. I just felt more confident in that report being a really good reflection of how he is … like I'd captured his needs well and I think that was down to seeing the Digital Story

Stakeholders also gave very useful suggestions for how to improve Digital Stories even further, including children taking a more active role in developing their own videos and making Digital Stories for older students. Overall, the findings indicate that Digital Stories are a powerful way of gaining the voices of young autistic children, which can facilitate successful transitions and are also useful to educational psychologists during assessments.

Using Digital Stories to facilitate autistic young people to have a voice in their transition to adulthood

The importance of eliciting the voices of young people and their participation within decision making on matters that affect their lives, is robustly supported within government guidelines and legislation. However, previous research suggests that due to perceived communication barriers, children and young people on the autism spectrum are frequently excluded from decision making and consultations relating to their education planning and omitted from research studies.

The *Digital Storytelling approach helps to support children's assessments and transitions*

Autistic young people residing in residential schools who have complex needs are further underrepresented within research and decision-making. It is therefore crucial that autistic young people are included in this process and research develops and evaluates novel and creative methods, to ensure the views and voices of young people with complex needs are heard and understood.

This Doctoral research is being carried out with staff, students and families at Hill House School, which is a residential special school that supports autistic children and young people within complex needs. The project aims to adapt and extend the 'I am..' Digital Story methodology for young people

transitioning from the school, post-19. We are currently working with three young people from the School to co-create Digital Stories, as well as their care staff and other professionals. Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders are used to evaluate the perspectives, experiences and views of the Digital Storytelling methodology and its use within transition meetings.

During COVID, two young people moved from Hill House to their new home and the Digital Stories really came into their own! COVID limitations meant that visits to Hill House School to meet the young person were limited, so the Digital Story enabled every member of their new team to get to know them virtually. Staff were able to show all the skills, abilities, interests and independence of the young person and, crucially, to capture *their* voices whether they use speech or alternative means of communication. In short, the Digital Stories were invaluable for supporting young people's transitions during this time and feedback has been very positive, for example:

It isn't a story we have created, it is their story. It is showing what they enjoy doing, showing off the things they can do, all the things that create the fabric of who they are. That is what is missing from the 'normal' transition process (Care manager)

This really shows who she is, that was my overarching feeling about it. It is the way forward. It is an innovative and creative way to show people differently, move away from a 1-dimensional written report, and showing a bit of a 360-degree view of somebody (Social Worker)

We are continuing to work with students and staff to develop and evaluate new Digital Stories and this project is due to be completed by Spring 2021. We'll provide further updates then! In the meantime, please do check out a great short article about the project in SEN magazine written by the Hill House team, Louisa Burden and Kirsty Marsden.