



Pictured above: the ACoRNS logo

Websites



acorns-soton.org.uk

autismtransitions.org

Twitter



[@ACoRNSoton](https://twitter.com/ACoRNSoton)

Contact us



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25TH JUNE 2021

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 unique 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](#).

'Understanding unique and holistic autistic childhoods: using a Froebelian lens to challenge deficit-focused thinking and practices via Digital Stories'. Hosted by the University of Edinburgh's Moray House School of Education and Sport, the main theme of the conference was *Visions of Social Justice, Equity and Integrity in the Year of Childhood*, and 173 delegates from 6 continents attended.



The team talking with the Chair of the session

The workshop highlighted how young autistic children's agency can be foregrounded when we take a holistic approach to understanding childhood, informed by [Froebelian principles](#) of early childhood. This workshop drew upon our

Froebel Trust funded research on transitions which can be explored [here](#).



ACoRNS team members will also be well represented at the upcoming [Inclusive and Supportive Education Conference \(ISEC\) 2021](#) which is hosted by UCL Centre for Inclusive Education and the National Association for Special Educational Needs, and held online from 3rd-5th August 2021. We'll be talking about the ACoRNS participatory model for connecting research and practice, and about our Digital Stories research. Our DEdPsych student [Stephanie Lewis](#) will talk about her research with Hill House School on using Digital Stories to support transitions into adult life, and our Integrated PhD student [Verity Ward](#) will talk about her research exploring the inclusive pedagogic strategies of teachers using technologies for teaching and learning. It's not too late to book places for the conference!:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/inclusive-supportive-education-conference/>



ACoRNS News

International conferences

Sarah Parsons, Kathryn Ivil, Henry Wood-Downie, Hanna Kovshoff and Verity Ward presented a workshop at the 9th Biennial International Froebel Society Conference on Friday 4th June 2021, titled:

New funded Doctoral studentship

We are really pleased to have been awarded ESRC funding for a studentship from the [South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership](#) (SCDTP). The studentship was awarded for a project titled: [Falling through the gaps? Investigating the experiences of autistic young people within Care and Education Treatment Reviews](#). This project is a collaboration between ACoRNS and the Care and Education Treatment Reviews (CETR) team for the SHIP region (Southampton, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth), and will start in September 2021.

Emily Ellington has been awarded funding to study for a 1+3 PhD, which is a year of taught study on a Masters programme followed by three years of research. Emily has worked in the field of SEND and Inclusion for 12 years and is passionate about using research to inform policy and practice. The project is supervised by Dr Hanna Kovshoff in Psychology and Prof Sarah Parsons in Education, in collaboration with Jenni Ransom from the CETR team. Welcome Emily!



Emily Ellington who is joining ACoRNS from September 2021

A new collaboration with Oak Lodge School

We are also really pleased to welcome Oak Lodge School in Southampton to ACoRNS, via Alison Garner who is the Lead Teacher at the Oakmore site and Head of English. Alison has longstanding interests in connecting research and practice and so was keen to get involved.

Oak Lodge school will be collaborating with another of our SCDTP funded Doctoral students, [Roseanna Tansley](#), on research that will explore the [intense interests of autistic pupils and how these can be used effectively to support](#)

the teaching and learning of secondary-aged autistic pupils.

Details of Rosie's published paper that explored the literature on this topic are included below. We know that this is a topic that will be of interest to many so please do get in touch with Rosie if you'd like to know more or get involved in some way: rt4g14@soton.ac.uk



ACoRNS webinars

On 11th June 2021 Dr Henry Wood-Downie shared his research on [sex / gender differences in camouflaging in autistic children and adolescents](#) at our open ACoRNS webinar. 41 people joined us for the webinar which also created some great questions and comments!

The recording of the talk is now available [here](#) until Friday July 30th 2021. There is also a certificate of participation and a copy of the slide available from the same link. You can contact Henry via email: Henry.Wood@soton.ac.uk

We are currently planning our autumn programme and so will let you know about future webinar dates once we have firmed these up!

Resources for understanding and explaining autism

We really appreciate you getting in touch with queries. Here's a question that came from one of our network members that got us thinking:

"Do you know of an accessible text for adults to help them better understand (and therefore communicate more effectively/patiently) with an adult who was relatively diagnosed with autism?"

We thought it would be useful to share the ideas that ACoRNS team members came up with. Some of these are targeted at children, and some at adults, and some are videos rather than books, but all have the same core idea of keeping information and ideas accessible and based on lived experiences:

- [Existing Autistic](#) by Megan Rhiannon is a lovely illustrated book about the authors own experiences of receiving a diagnosis in her 20's
- [Explaining autism](#) is a short animation from YourSpaceWestSussex
- This is a good [comic book representation](#) by Rebecca Burgess
- [The Thing - a young boy's journey with Asperger Syndrome](#) by Rachel Jackson
- [The Electricity of Every Living Thing](#) by Katherine May
- [Odd girl out](#) by Laura James
- [Autism in heels](#) by Jennifer Cook O'Toole
- [The Duck](#) by Rhi Lloyd Williams
- Sonia Boué's [blog](#)
- [My Awesome Autism](#) by Nikki Saunders
- [Ty the Dinosaur and the Substitute Teacher](#) by Marcus Tallberg, Jill Faulkner, Klaudia Draibikowska
- [The Secret Life of Rose: Inside An Autistic Head](#) by Rose and Jodie Smitten (daughter and mum, both autistic)
- [Can you see me?](#) by Libby Scott (autistic child) and Rebecca Westcott
- [The curly hair project](#) by Alis Rowe
- [All cats have Asperger Syndrome](#) by Kathy Hoopmann

And finally, one of the team recommended [Tracey Moroney's "When I'm feeling..."](#) set of books for helping any child to understand emotions. They are not autism-specific but are really helpful. There is also a series of YouTube videos to accompany the books, for example [When I'm feeling Happy](#)

Note: we are not endorsing a particular seller by including their links here; just pointing you towards details so you can find out more.

ACoRNS research summaries



Here we will share the summaries of published papers by members of ACoRNS. Some of these are available as 'open access' papers and others are not. **Please get in touch if you would like the full paper and / or the links do not work!:** s.j.parsons@soton.ac.uk

Roseanna Tansley, Sarah Parsons, Hanna Kovshoff (2021). How are intense interests used within schools to support inclusion and learning for secondary-aged autistic pupils? A scoping review. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, DOI: [10.1080/08856257.2021.1911520](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2021.1911520)

To request a copy of the paper you can do this really easily via [this link](#)

Approximately 1.3% (42,555 pupils) of secondary school pupils in England are autistic and there are numerous reports of poor academic and social experiences amongst this group. The intense interests that form part of an autism diagnosis relate to an increased focus on specific topics or objects and are reported to positively impact learning when effectively embedded into teaching. However, there is very little research into how interests may be used to support learning at secondary school and little analysis of whether the utilisation of intense interests is conceptualised and implemented as an inclusive practice.

This scoping review explored how intense interests are used to support the learning of autistic adolescents and provides a conceptual analysis of the six papers identified, all from the United States. Three applications of intense interests were reported: power cards, lunch clubs and responding to joint attention. A within-child, deficit-focused perspective was consistent throughout all papers with the aim being to improve the 'appropriate' target behaviour of autistic children. There is limited research overall,

and so further research is needed to examine how intense interests can be implemented in practice in more inclusive ways.

Sarah Parsons (2021). The importance of collaboration for knowledge co-construction in 'close-to-practice' research. *British Educational Research Journal*, DOI: [10.1002/berj.3714](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3714) [this paper can be accessed in full from this link]

This commentary is offered in response to the British Educational Research Association (BERA)'s commissioned report on close-to-practice research. In conducting a rapid evidence assessment coupled with a small number of qualitative interviews the report represents an overly dichotomised and partial approach to understanding the relationships between research and practice, and the nature of knowledge generated within such relationships.

Specifically, the report fails to adequately address the central importance of collaboration to the generation of knowledge and assumes that knowledge is either academic research or practitioner enquiry, without considering a more integrated, co-constructed 'third space'. I argue that practice-focused research should be fundamentally concerned with making an impact on practice and, therefore, effective collaboration between research and practice necessarily entails grappling with issues of power and democratisation. These are values that underpin and shape research in important ways that must be considered in conceptualisations of methodological quality. I also raise questions about the transparency and quality of decision-making in the close-to-practice BERA report, including whether the six papers identified as 'high quality' by the authors would meet their own definition. Their report is not definitive but rather a catalyst for further discussion. I offer suggestions for some practical steps for how BERA could work to provide a more holistic framing for this vital field of inquiry.

Henry Wood-Downie, Verity Ward, Kathryn Ivil, Hanna Kovshoff, Sarah Parsons (2021). Using Digital Stories for assessments and transition planning for autistic pre-school children. *Educational & Child Psychology*

To request a copy of the paper you can do this really easily via [this link](#).

Aims: 'I am...' Digital Stories are short videos designed to provide a holistic, strengths-based representation of the child through enabling them to contribute their perspectives to transition planning. Digital Stories have potential during periods in which professionals are unable to physically visit settings or spend time getting to know a child. This paper describes the use of Digital Stories in two contexts: (1) being shown at the beginning of person-centred planning meetings focusing on the transition to primary school and (2) as a tool to support educational psychologists conducting Education, Health, and Care Needs Assessments for preschool children during COVID-19.

Method: Data was collected via seven semi-structured interviews, 15 feedback forms, and videos of four meetings. Participants comprised six parents/carers, five nursery practitioners, three school staff members, and six educational psychologists. Thematic analysis resulted in five main themes: thinking differently; a wider conversation; more than words; seeing what they see; and potential barriers to making Digital Stories.

Limitations: Children were not able to make their own Digital Stories, which could have influenced their representation within the videos, transition meetings and assessments. However, children's body worn camera footage was included, enabling a perspective on their interactions and preferences that was closer to the child's worldview than other observational methods.

Conclusions: Digital Stories have a variety of benefits to practice, including being useful to educational psychologists during assessments, and have the potential to facilitate successful transitions from nursery to primary school

A Focus on transitions

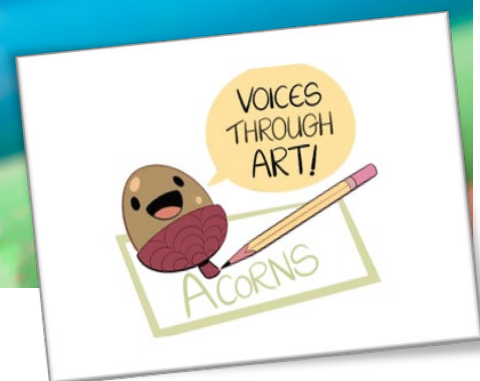
Voices Through Art is a collaborative project between ACoRNS (Dr Hanna Kovshoff, Prof Sarah Parsons & Intern Annie Keefe), Sam Davies, illustrator, and Tracie Raufi, Assistant Headteacher-Curriculum and Head of Art and Design, at New Forest School. We are designing four short comics with and for autistic children making the transition from primary to secondary school. The transition to secondary school is a daunting process, even more so for autistic individuals, where the move from smaller, better supported environments to larger, more independent ones can have potentially long-term negative impacts. This project aims to support the wellbeing of children, families, and schools during transitions by drawing on real transition experiences and feedback from students and staff at New Forest School to ensure the resulting comics reflect the priorities and views of autistic children and young people and promote ideas and strategies to improve transitions and educational experience more generally.



The team decided that creating a logo for the project would be the first opportunity to start testing out the best ways to work collaboratively with young people to create artwork. We hoped this would be a good trial run for the comic making process in including the students' ideas and experiences. Sam began by sketching initial design options based around ideas of our ACoRNS logo and art, and these were then taken by Tracie's students (Years 7-10) to design their own logos. The students highlighted that the image alone needed to give a good sense of the project, as some young people may be unable to read any accompanying text. Through their feedback and artwork, Sam was able to incorporate different elements of the students' designs and suggestions, keeping their ideas and feedback in mind when generating final design of our logo.



Sam's second round of designs. We selected the top right image.



More recently, we have participated in a workshop run by Tracie and Sam at New Forest School. We have strived to include student voices at every step of our project but wanted to add a more immersive element to our work to help student motivation on the project.

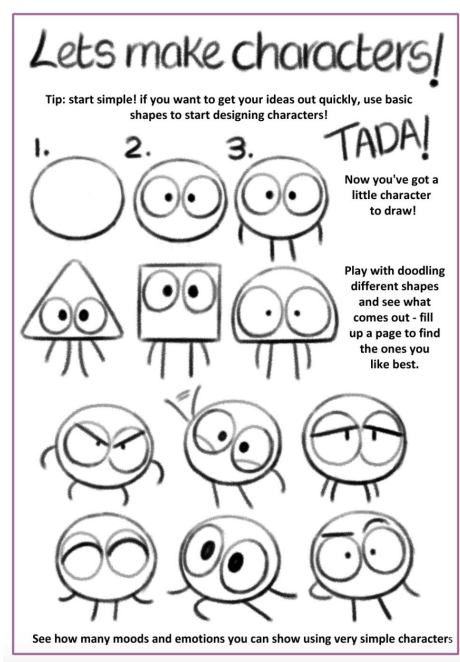


Tracie's noticeboard involving extracts from the comic, student work and informative posts from our Instagram page

A group of 12 students from New Forest School (mostly Years 7-8) took part in a day-long workshop which was used as an opportunity for the students to meet the Team working on the project and for us to gather first-hand feedback and ideas from the students. The morning session involved a brief icebreaker before the students were split into two groups – the first group worked with Sam and Tracie in the art room

colouring in Sam's line art characters, choosing the colours that they felt best suited the characters.

They also talked about the animal characters including which they identified with and what they thought the characters might say to each other if they bumped into each other on their first day. They also played around with drawing out their own characters starting with basic circle outlines that Sam generated to teach young people how to draw comic characters.



An example of the task Sam and Tracie carried out with the students

Meanwhile, the second group worked with Amanda, New Forest School's English Teacher, and Annie to discuss the individual panels of the comic. Students were prompted to think about what the different colours and expressions of the characters meant, how each animal could represent a certain feeling or personality trait and relate back to their own transition experiences. They also talked about

their own transitions, including what they felt worked best for them when they joined New Forest school and how they felt listened to. The groups rotated after lunch and carried out the previous group's task.



Students used this panel to explore what emotions the colours & body language represented



The team enjoying their hard-earned lunch (left-to-right: Hanna, Tracie, Sam and Annie)

The team are very grateful for this collaboration with New Forest School – and for Tracie's organisation of a busy day where everyone could come together to work on the comic art and storylines.

The workshop enabled us to generate ideas for new character colours, animals, and storylines based on the students' feedback, suggestions, and experiences. Sam is busily creating the next iteration of comics and we will once more gather student feedback on these. We expect the students will be able to see how their involvement in the workshop supported the next comic, and as ever, we look forward to all their comments and

feedback to these which we will gather before the end of the summer term.

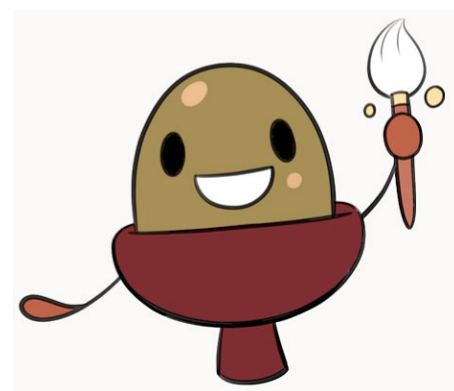


One student took engagement with the skittles icebreaker to an artistic level

If you would like to be a part of this pilot please get in touch with Hanna Kovshoff who is leading the project:

H.Kovshoff@soton.ac.uk

You can follow our exciting progress on Instagram at [@acornsvoices](https://www.instagram.com/acornsvoices) or on our blog: <https://acorns-soton.org.uk/category/acorns-art/>



Creative Autism Research Project

Are you 14 – 17?

Interested in studying psychology, visual arts, graphic design, education, or journalism?

Would you like the opportunity to develop new skills and add to your CV or university applications?

The University of Southampton is recruiting 10 autistic girls to participate as co-researchers in a creative project. The project will run from August to November 2021 and will involve regular online group sessions for discussion and creative tasks.

Members of the team may choose to participate either verbally or by typing on the chat function.

There are two aims for this project:

1. To design and create resources that will support autistic children with their transition from primary to secondary school.
2. To identify and evaluate the benefits of the process of working as a co-researcher on a participatory research project.

Participation is entirely voluntary.
Ethical approval for the study has been granted by
The University of Southampton (ERGO ID: 64210)

To receive an information pack or find out more,
contact Chloe East: c.east@soton.ac.uk

