



Pictured above: the ACoRNS logo and the University of Southampton logo



## Websites

[acorns-soton.org.uk](http://acorns-soton.org.uk)  
[autismtransitions.org](http://autismtransitions.org)



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



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## 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](#).

### [ESRC Impact Acceleration Account \(IAA\)](#)



Pictured: Voices through Art logo

ACoRNS has collaborated with illustrator [Sam Davies](#), Tracie Raufi (Assistant Headteacher-Curriculum and Head of Art and Design) and autistic students at [New Forest School](#) to co-produce a comic about the transition to secondary school. The comic tells the story of Lee Mouse who is getting ready for his first day at secondary school

The storyline reflects the voices and experiences of autistic students, as well as some of the strategies that they identified that support their

well-being at school. These include having positive and understanding relationships with staff members, a safe space to go to decompress, and an opportunity to talk through worries and fears.



Pictured: The front cover of the School Daze comic

We are working on developing educational resources that can be used alongside reading the comic – but in the meantime we would be very happy for you to share the comic

## ACoRNS News

### **School Daze comic published!**

We are really pleased to share a new comic called 'School Daze' as part of our Voices through Art project funded by the [University of Southampton's](#)

amongst your networks. Any feedback gratefully received! [The comic can be downloaded here.](#)



Pictured: Pupil workshop with Tracie in the art room at New Forest School

If you would like some printed comics for your settings, please get in touch with [Dr Hanna Kovshoff](#) at [h.kovshoff@soton.ac.uk](mailto:h.kovshoff@soton.ac.uk).

### New role for researcher

ACoRNS Research Fellow [Dr Judith-Bruce-Golding](#) has been appointed to a new role at the University as a Senior Teaching Fellow in Education Mental Health Practice. Judith will be working with future Educational Mental Health Practitioners who will be valuable resources in supporting the well-being of children and young people in schools and colleges.

Judith says: "This is a wonderful role for me because it brings together my previous special educational needs, education, and mental health skills. I am working with a lovely team who are passionate about mental health and psychology. I am looking forward to teaching, supporting others and contributing to the programme."



Pictured: Dr Judith Bruce-Golding

Judith will continue with her research on our Epilepsy Research UK funded research, led by Dr Hanna Kovshoff, into '**Surgery pathways: The lived experiences of children with epilepsy**'. See [here](#) for a blogpost about the project.

### Autistica Scientific Panel Role

[Professor Sarah Parsons](#) has been invited to join Autistica's Scientific Review Panel as the Vice-Chair.

[Autistica](#) is the UK's national autism research charity, focusing on 'giving autistic people the opportunity to live long, happy, healthy lives.' Autistica fund research, shape policy and works with autistic people to understand their needs. Sarah is looking forward to joining the panel and supporting Autistica's goals over the next few years.



Pictured: Autistica logo

### New Funding for Digital Stories project

Sarah Parsons and Hanna Kovshoff have been awarded further funding from the University of Southampton's Impact Acceleration Account and the Froebel Trust for a project that builds

on the work we have completed for the ESRC funded '[Our Stories](#)' project. The 'Our Stories' project continued to develop our innovative [Digital Stories methodology](#) which aims to support autistic children and young people in transitional processes. Digital Stories are co-created short videos that enable the participation of children and families who are usually marginalised and disempowered within these processes.

The new follow-on project runs for 10 months from May 1<sup>st</sup> and will support the development of short, animated video guides for creating Digital Stories in practice.



Pictured: Autek logo

This is a partnership with [Autek CIC](#), and the University of Sussex. ACoRNS partners Hill House School, New Forest School and Springwell School will also be involved. Autek partnered with us on the *Our Stories* project; they are a neurodiverse team who provide employment opportunities in Hampshire for autistic and disabled people focusing on video production, video tours and animation.

There will also be knowledge exchange events to promote the materials and so we'll send more details of those in due course!





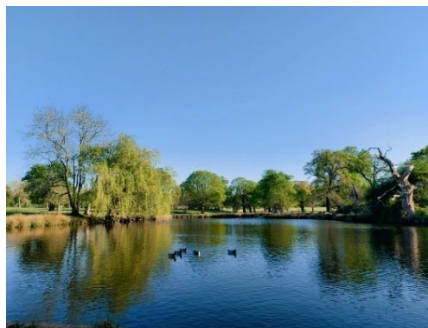
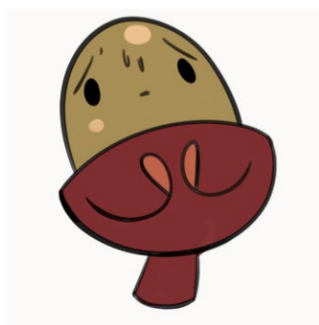
## Research training at Cumberland Lodge

This April some of ACoRNS' South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership funded PhD students attended the first [Cumberland Lodge](#) residential training event since the start of Lockdown. It was an amazing opportunity to develop and learn new study skills, network with other PhD funded students, and work on their projects alongside their peers in a beautiful location surrounded by nature.



Pictured from left to right: Verity Ward, Rosie Tansley and Chloe East

Of course, there were many walks around Windsor's Great Park where our students encountered a variety of wildlife ranging from Deer to Green Woodpeckers – and even a Badger! The weather was beautiful, which made the whole experience even more memorable. Overall, an amazing couple of days away and we thank the SCDTP for arranging such an important and valuable event.



Pictured: one of the amazing views at Cumberland Lodge

## Next ACoRNS Open webinar!

**'An introduction to Fizzacc - a creative participatory research group working to support autistic girls with their transition to secondary school'**

**Speaker: Chloe East**

**Friday May 27<sup>th</sup> 2022; 09:30-10:30 (BST)**

**Via Zoom:**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82049240326?pwd=OGxmTkxySFBiMEpHWTh5Wk9nVjdjOTQ9>

Meeting ID: 820 4924 0326

Passcode: 847371

**No registration necessary; free to attend.**

**The session will be recorded and certificates of participation will be available. All welcome.**



The primary to secondary school transition is difficult for autistic children. While there are effective strategies that support transitions, girls, who are likely to be formally identified as autistic later than boys, are often overlooked. This research project puts autistic girls at the centre and harnesses their experience and expertise to promote better understanding from teachers and peers.

This presentation will include information about the creative methods used in the research. These include using body mapping to explore the embodied experiences of education as experienced by Fizzacc members, and the stories that have been created in the analysis of the data gathered through this process. These stories reveal important opportunities for raising awareness and developing more inclusive practices for autistic girls.

Chloe East is PhD student at the University of Southampton. Previously she was a drama teacher in secondary schools and has also worked in early years and primary education. Her focus is on using creativity to support participation and promoting the voices of autistic young people in research about themselves. This research is funded by the ESRC's [South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership](#).

You can read more about the project and find out how to get involved [here](#). You can also email Chloe directly: [C.East@soton.ac.uk](mailto:C.East@soton.ac.uk).

## ACoRNS research summaries



Here we will share the summaries of published ACoRNS research. All of these are available as free open access from the links provided. **Please get in touch with any queries and / or if the links do not work!:** [s.j.parsons@soton.ac.uk](mailto:s.j.parsons@soton.ac.uk)

**Jennifer Pickles, Sarah Parsons, Hanna Kovshoff (2022). Knowledgeable but not specialist: Virtual School Heads' experiences of supporting autistic children in care. *Oxford Review of Education*.**

**Full article is free to access and download from [this link](#).**

Autistic children comprise a large group of young people who are looked-after by their local authority and for whom educational outcomes are amongst the poorest of all children in care. Virtual School Heads (VSHs) in England have a statutory responsibility to improve the educational outcomes of children in care following the implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014. However, very little is known about the experiences of VSHs in supporting autistic children in care, including whether and how knowledge about autism diagnosis is shared within interprofessional teams.

This qualitative study reports the findings from nine semi-structured interviews with eight VSHs and one occupational therapist from eight local authorities in England. VSHs worked within multiple and diverse teams locally and nationally to co-ordinate and manage effective provision but reported that knowledge about autism was often uncertain and conflated with attachment difficulties. They could not state with confidence that individuals around the child were sufficiently enabled to provide appropriate support and educational provision. The VSH, and the children they support, occupy liminal roles which create challenges for effective

communication and support. Crucially, young people's views need to be authentically gathered and holistically understood to inform and improve provision.

**Harriet Hummerstone & Sarah Parsons (2022). Co-designing methods with autistic students to facilitate discussions of sensory preferences with school staff: exploring the double empathy problem, *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*.**

**Full article is free to access and download from [this link](#).**

Reviews have called for the greater involvement of autistic young people in developing methods for eliciting their views. Methodologically, co-design is important for developing credible and acceptable approaches; conceptually and practically, co-design offers a means through which to address the double empathy problem for research and practice, which states that autistic people have difficulties understanding the perspectives and communication of non-autistic people, and vice versa.

This study reports both methodological and pedagogical observations through critical reflections on a co-design process of a paper-based method for sharing information about sensory preferences with six autistic students aged 12-13 years, 16 educational practitioners, and five autistic adults. The co-design process supported students to share information with each other and build self-awareness. Participants were positive about the potential for sharing information but raised concerns about the extent to which new knowledge would impact on teaching practices. Co-designed methods are needed in tandem with sustained autism awareness to change attitudes and educational practices.

**Verity C. Ward, Sarah Parsons, Hanna Kovshoff and Benjamin Crump (2022). Co-creation of research and design during a coding club with autistic students using multimodal participatory methods and analysis, *Frontiers in Education, Special Issue on Championing Inclusion and Diversity*:**

### ***Inclusive Design Practices and Approaches for Education.***

**Full article is free to access and download from [this link](#).**

Participatory design aims to work with those who are often excluded from design processes so that their interests are better represented in design solutions. Autistic children are often marginalised and excluded from design processes due to concerns about how their social and communication differences may act as barriers to participation, leading to calls for design processes to be more inclusive and examined more closely to understand the value of participation for (autistic) children and young people.

This research describes a participatory design project to develop a computer game during a weekly coding club at a special school. Fourteen autistic (neurodivergent) young people, eight staff members, four technology industry representatives and a Doctoral researcher worked together to design, develop, test and evaluate the game. This paper focuses specifically on the views and experiences of two of the students, which are captured primarily through a Digital Story. Digital Stories are short student-centred videos which show educational experiences.

We use a social semiotic multimodal approach to analysis which does not prioritise linguistically encoded meaning, instead recognising the importance and validity of the many and varied ways in which students contributed to the project. The findings highlight the valuable opportunities that participatory design processes can provide for students as both learners and as expert knowers. It emphasises the need to allow room for students' agency in the design process, so that they really can have a say in the outcomes of design and feel ownership over the process and outcomes of their research participation.



# Celebrating Digital Stories at Springwell School

By Sarah Parsons & Asha Ward



For this issue we wanted to place a spotlight on the brilliant work that our ACoRNS partner Springwell School has been doing to embed Digital Stories at the school and to use these to support children's transitions. We are really proud and privileged to be working with Springwell, led in all of these efforts by Kate Buckingham who is Assistant Head Teacher for Curriculum and Assessment.



Pictured: Kate Buckingham

the school have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). The school currently supports approximately 270 children with a staff team of around 240.

Springwell School were partners in our ACoRNS [ESRC-funded 'Our Stories' project](#) which has applied and extended our participatory Digital Storytelling methodology to explore the challenge of gathering a range of views from autistic children, families, and practice in authentic ways to support transitions between different people and contexts.

Digital Storytelling is an accessible and inclusive methodology that supports the sharing of views and experiences in visual, video form. We have very successfully used this approach to explore the [perspectives of 4-year-old autistic children](#) to inform transition planning to their first schools, and [teaching and learning practices with new technologies](#) in schools that support autistic children with a wide range of needs.

Pictured below: The 'I am...' Digital Stories Framework



## Spaces

Where does the child like to be or explore?

Outdoor: the sandpit, mud kitchen, water play, gardens, forest school, painting, trampoline, climbing.

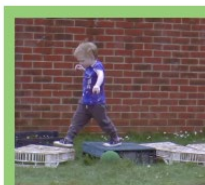
Inside: at tables or on a sofa, or any child-led activities.



## People and interactions

How do children like to spend their time and who do they interact with?

Children will interact in different ways with staff and peers. They may also like to spend time by themselves. Interactions can be child-led or adult-led.



## Independence and agency

What does the child choose to do for themselves?

This can include: exploring, requesting, initiating, choosing or deciding, acting upon an interest or desire.



## Objects and interests

What is the child really interested in and like doing?

Look out for preferred books, toys, use of play equipment, clothing, use of outdoor spaces, and the importance of touch or sensory stimulation and responses.



## Communication and expression

In what ways does the child express themselves?

This could be verbal or non-verbal and directed at the self or others.



## Support

What behaviours show where the child needs support?

Include some indication of the areas where the child needs support to encourage their progression.



## Skills and capabilities

What is the child good at?

There are many things that could be shown here e.g. cutting, threading, painting, pouring, making, counting, talking, sharing, running, bouncing, picking, throwing, climbing, initiating, responding, sitting, joining-in.

[Springwell School](#) is a primary school in Thornhill, Southampton that provides consistently outstanding provision (based on Ofsted reports) for children aged 4 – 11 years with complex learning difficulties. All children have a severe level of learning difficulties and many are also autistic and / or have social and communication difficulties. All children who attend

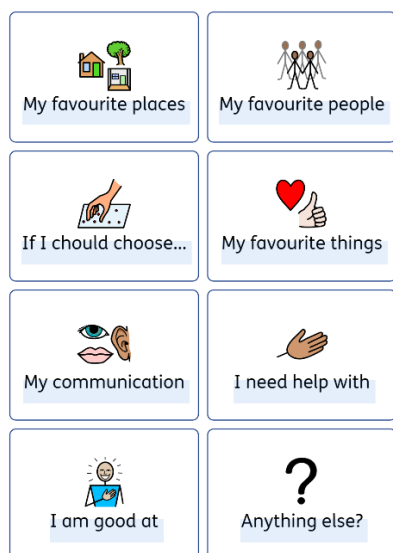
*"I think health professionals involved with the children should watch the stories before making assessments/ reviews. This would certainly give a much better idea of what the child is like"*

Kristy, Henry's mum

Under Kate's inspirational leadership, Springwell wanted to support all of their Year 6 pupils in the summer term of 2021 to create their own, individual 'I am...' Digital Stories, which the school called 'All About Me' stories.

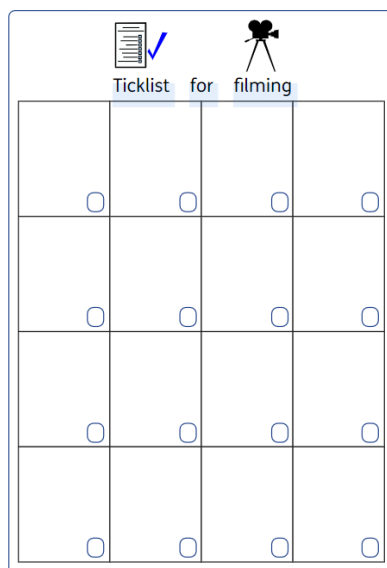
Consequently, more than 30 children were supported by their class teachers and teaching assistants to create their Stories, and the work was embedded within the curriculum and planned lessons e.g. IT and English. There were varying levels of support given depending on the different needs of the children. Some preferred to conduct all levels of the Story creation themselves from mapping, filming, describing, and editing and others had support from the teaching staff.

A project book for each child was created outlining the 7 areas of the 'I am...' framework. The project books were used as a tool to map out some things that were then later filmed.

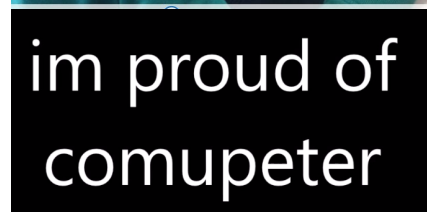
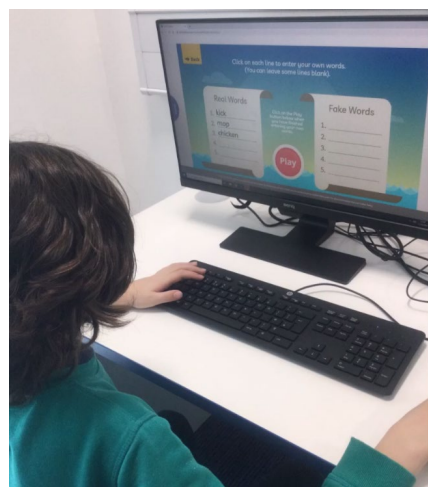


Pictured: one of the pages from Springwell's 'All about me' booklet

Children collected footage using Wearcams and iPads and at other times staff and support workers took footage of them. They also used images downloaded from the internet/school software before collating these on school computers using Windows Movie Maker software.



Pictured: a filming checklist from the children's project book



Pictured: screenshots from one of the children's Stories

The Stories were shown to staff at the secondary school to which most children move in Year 7. The Stories were also used at a leaver's assembly as a celebration of the pupil's time at Springwell in a red carpet online/in real life event. This involved each class having a screening of all of the Stories from their class. After each Story was finished applause was giving whilst the child walked the red carpet and received a Springwell t-shirt and certificate. Parents/carers and siblings watched online and were on a large screen in the classroom next to the red carpet.

This was an amazing experience for us, as the research team, to be part of. We could see how much pride the children took in their Stories and how much families appreciated seeing them. There were definitely some tears on the day! It was also an excellent reminder about the important of rituals and how 'endings' are marked and celebrated as a step towards a new beginning.

In creating their own 'I am...' Stories, the children of Springwell were enabled to explore not only the telling of the story about themselves, and the things that mattered to them, but also the technical aspects of using hardware and software to capture this leading to development in a variety of areas that could tie into the curriculum.

We also saw that video leaves less ambiguity about the things that matter to children, since we can see them enjoying spaces, activities, interactions, and objects

in ways that would be difficult to describe on paper.

Kate recognised how valuable this process was for the children and the School:

*"It's about the pupil voice. It was about getting the real child. I read a lot of reports in my day-to-day job of varying quality but it's very rare that you really get to know the child. And this is an opportunity to get to know the children, and for all the people who need to, to get to know the children in a really, real environment."*

*"It's about getting to know the child as a child, not a piece of paper. Not a diagnosis. Not a list of things they can't do but all the things they really love and the things that are important to them that get lost on a piece of paper."*



Pictured: Gisbert directed his Story and took us on a school tour



Pictured: 'In my spare time I like to read'

As a result, Springwell School have embarked on a new round of story creation in 2022 for all Year 5 and Year 6 pupils. Kate wanted to start earlier this year so that there was more time to create the Stories and share them in helpful ways.

For example, all the Year 5 Stories are being shared with the Local Authority as part of the annual review process. All the Year 6 videos will be shared with the school(s) to which children will transition in September. We will keep monitoring what kind of impact sharing the Stories has on transition practices and report back!

Kate would like to continue to develop the method, through including parents and families as well in the Story creation process, where possible. Kate also said that she is working on how pupil voice, and the principles of the 'I am' Digital Stories, can be incorporated more widely across the school. This includes school council meetings and in annual reviews. As Kate says:

*"...even if it's not a video, how are we presenting that information to the children and making sure we're getting their viewpoints as best we can? So, it's a big piece of work!"*

From our perspective as the research team, we think Kate and the Springwell team have done an amazing job of supporting so many children, last year and this, to create their own Digital Stories to showcase their personalities, strengths, interests and communication styles and needs.

We are currently in the process of analysing the Stories as a way of reflecting more deeply on what we learn about the children and their roles as storytellers about their experiences at school. We'll report more on that in due course. As reported in the New section on p.2, we have also secured some new funding to create some guidance materials for other schools and organisations that may want to create their own Digital Stories. We'll be including Kate and the team in that work as well!

A huge thank you to Springwell for being such brilliant partners to work with and for carrying forward the Digital Stories work in such an impressive way. For anyone who would like to know more about how Springwell achieved all of this, please contact Kate:

[kbuckingham@springwellschool.net](mailto:kbuckingham@springwellschool.net)