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Understanding holistic and unique childhoods: knowledge generation in the early years with autistic children, families and practitioners

Short title: Knowledge generation in the early years

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Abstract

The knowledge of children with special educational needs and disabilities, and their families, is essential for informing educational transition planning and decision-making. However, often their views are marginalised through formalised processes and assessments which underestimate children's capabilities and prioritise professional knowledge. We draw upon a project in an early years setting that involved 5 young autistic children, their families, and practitioners in the creation of Digital Stories as the children prepared for transition to school. Parents and practitioners contributed exemplary (practical) knowledge and children contributed embodied knowledge about the things that mattered to them. We analysed the Stories to find out what we learned about the children through taking these different perspectives. Children's embodied knowledge revealed their voices, interests and capabilities, with a focus on the spaces where they liked to be and who they chose to spend time with (including themselves). Parents and practitioners shared knowledge about the objects and interests of the child, the choices they make, and where support is needed. Taken together, the Stories provide an holistic view of the child that moves beyond difficulties and challenges. The Stories could be an important tool for professionals and families for supporting children's transitions.

Key words: Digital Stories, early years, children's voices, autism, transitions

Introduction

The experiences and perspectives of children and families are central to the work of early years education professionals. Understanding more about these perspectives became even more pressing in England following the Children and Families Act 2014, and its shaping of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (SEND CoP; Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015), which considerably strengthened the role of children and families in educational decision-making in England. Specifically, the SEND CoP mandates that children's and parents' views *must* be sought 'as fully as possible' by local authorities in making decisions about educational provision (p.19). Moreover, the CoP is clear that parents must not act as proxies for children's views and that 'Young people will have their own perspective and local authorities should have arrangements in place to engage with them directly' (p.22). Thus, there is acknowledgement that children's and parents' views are important and should inform practice, and yet may differ in important ways from each other and must be accorded validity in their own right.

However, securing and responding to children's and parents' views can be less than straightforward in practice. Recent evidence suggests there is an underrepresentation of children's direct views within their Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans, and a tendency to focus disproportionately on children's difficulties and challenges rather than a holistic view that includes their strengths and capabilities (Palikara, Castro, Gaona, & Eirinaki, 2018).

Unfortunately, these findings align with a history of children's voices, especially those of children with SEND, being doubted as offering valid and authentic insights on their own experiences; partly through underestimating children's capabilities to form and express their views (Lundy, 2007; Franklin & Sloper, 2009), and through a lack of application of creative methodologies aimed at accessing those views (Morris, 2003; Ellis, 2017). It is also well documented that some parents feel marginalised within the formal processes of assessment and reviews within education (O'Connor, McConkey & Hartop, 2005). For example, parents describe the 'battles' experienced in securing appropriate provision for their children (Paradice &

Adewusi, 2002), and feeling ill-equipped, intimidated, and undermined by professional discourses about their children (Cook & Swain, 2002; Duncan, 2003).

Within this context, the voices of autistic children and their families tend to be amongst the least heard, and difficulties experienced within the education system some of the most pronounced. For example, the Lamb Inquiry into SEN provision in England (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2006, p.18) noted the ‘...frustration and upset caused to parents and families by the failure of the system to meet the needs of these [autistic] children’. A review of education for autistic children in England (APPGA / National Autistic Society, 2017) showed that significant difficulties persist for families in securing appropriate provision and ‘the language of the battlefield’ is still prevalent (p.30).

Lawlor and Solomon (2017; p.234) argued that parental and family expertise in autism ‘...grounded in lived experience’, tends to be ‘...dismissed, at times pejoratively, as anecdotal or unscientific’ in research and professional discourses and processes because of a bias towards biomedical ‘public knowledge and scientific evidence’. Therefore, it may not be surprising that parents feel they must go into ‘battle’ to have their voices heard. Likewise, there is evidence that autistic children’s views are regularly underestimated and overlooked because of prejudices that assume that autistic children are unable to comment on their own experiences due to the social and communication difficulties which form the basis for their diagnosis (Ellis, 2017; LeFrancois & Coppock, 2014;). This is especially the case in the early years where young autistic children’s voices are rarely, if ever, sought and heard (Fayette & Bond, 2018; Parsons et al., 2020a).

Similar processes of marginalisation are also well documented for early years practitioners, regarding the low status accorded to both their professional expertise (Newman & Leggett, 2019) and their place as knowledge generators in research (Parsons et al., 2020b). Such marginalisation is especially problematic in a context where early intervention for children on

the autism spectrum is well-established as a major feature of best practice (Parsons et al., 2011) and yet in which the practicalities of implementation are often not considered.

The important question therefore is: how can we more appropriately explore and understand the knowledge and expertise of young autistic children, their families, and early years practitioners in educational planning and decision-making? In addressing this question, we drew on three interrelated imperatives. First, there is a need to start with a focus on how we can include the voices of young children with significant communication difficulties or delay (Morris, 2003). Second, the onus lies with us to seek creative methods that enable the inclusion of different voices and an understanding of the knowledge that is produced (Nind, 2008). Third, as Conn (2015; p.61; our emphasis) argued:

‘the differential subjectivity of autism necessitates an approach to research that allows for shared interpretations produced by research participants – including children and adults – *thinking together* with the researcher about the nature of the children’s experience’

Therefore, we wanted to enable a process of ‘thinking together’ to create and share situated knowledge from different stakeholders in ways that respected their different ways of knowing about children’s experiences. We draw upon our research with young children, families, and early years practitioners to illustrate our methodological approach using Digital Storytelling and present substantive findings relating to the nature of the knowledge generated about the child. Specifically, our objectives were to (1) represent the voices of autistic children as they prepared for the transition from nursery to primary school; (2) promote the perspectives of autistic children via Digital Stories as valid evidence of experiences in their own right; and (3) enable the knowledge of parents and practitioners to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the child within transition processes.

Context for the research

This project was a collaboration between academics in Education and Psychology at the University of Southampton and Aviary Nursery in Eastleigh, South of England, as part of the Autism Community Research Network @ Southampton (ACoRNS). ACoRNS is a research-practice partnership that co-constructs a locally meaningful evidence base with educational practitioners to make a difference to educational practice. ACoRNS includes specialist and mainstream schools, and spans early years through to Further and Higher Education (see Parsons & Kovshoff, 2019). Aviary Nursery is a fully inclusive day nursery which provides a child-led, play-focused context. Its numbers for 2019/20 range from 17-26 depending on the day and session, with 43%-53% of these numbers being children with SEND.

Materials and methods

Overview and epistemology

Our Digital Storytelling methodology was inspired by the work of Lambert (2010; 2013), and drew upon our previous research co-constructing evidence with educational practitioners (Parsons et al., 2015; Guldborg et al., 2017). Digital Storytelling offers a way of understanding practice, and generating practice-informing evidence, that moves beyond formalised reports and written documents. Through using video and audio in Digital Storytelling it is possible to capture interactions and practices in real time for subsequent scrutiny and reflection. The creation of Digital Stories is a synergistic process, done in collaboration with families and practitioners to develop short videos that represent important aspects of 'being' as well as 'doing'. In other words, the Stories were intended to provide insights into *who children are*, with a deliberate aim to provide a more holistic view of them focusing on their strengths and capabilities, and the practices that enable their inclusion and participation at nursery. Our work was informed by the Froebelian principles of early childhood which emphasise the uniqueness of every child's capacity and potential, and the holistic nature of child development (The Froebel Trust, not dated). The methodology and conceptual approach adopted for this study, including navigating the important ethical considerations, are explored in more detail in related research papers (Parsons et al., 2020a, 2020b).

As we argue elsewhere (Parsons et al. 2020b), Digital Storytelling provides a way of connecting the exemplary (practical) knowledge of practitioners and families with the embodied knowledge of children. Respectively, this means: using and sharing examples from adults' own experiences to connect with others to make insights, develop understanding, and build theory (exemplary knowledge; cf. Thomas, 2012); and capturing knowledge from children's experiences and interactions with their worlds in a way that does not require or rely on verbal articulation (embodied knowledge; cf. Lawlor & Solomon, 2017). To access children's embodied knowledge, we used standard video cameras within the nursery to capture children's interactions and exploration and augmented this with footage taken from individual Wecams attached to children's tops. Thus, we placed a more traditional, observational lens *on* the children and also a less traditional, more embodied lens *with* the children. To enable the gathering of exemplary knowledge, we filmed with practitioners and families watching footage of the children, as well as in a more standard interview format where questions about experiences were posed.

Participants and ethics

Five 4-year-old boys who transitioned to primary school in September 2018 were included. All had an EHC plan from which diagnostic information was drawn. Four boys had been formally diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum; one child was diagnosed with global developmental delay with some 'traits of Autism Spectrum Disorder'. All children were delayed in developing speech such that most were not yet using spoken full words to communicate. Eight parents /carers participated in on-camera interviews and off-camera discussions: mothers and fathers for two of the boys, mothers for two of the children, and the mother and grandmother of the fifth child. Four staff members from Aviary nursery participated in on-camera interviews: two early years' practitioners (qualified to Level 3; 1 male, 1 female), the Inclusion Teacher (qualified teacher; male), and the Nursery manager (female; fourth co-author). Most other Aviary staff were involved indirectly though being filmed interacting with children.

Parents and practitioners received information sheets and signed consent forms for participation; consent included agreeing to the Digital Stories being shared beyond the nursery and made publicly available. There was also an ongoing assent process undertaken with children by staff who knew them well to make sure they were comfortable with the presence, and wearing, of the cameras; if children were uncomfortable with the cameras then filming did not take place. The project was reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Social Science Research Ethics Committee at the University of Southampton [Ref # 31478.A3].

Process and procedures

Nursery staff were introduced to Digital Stories by the research team during a half-day workshop that explained the project and their roles in supporting the creation of the Stories, especially through ensuring the child's perspective and experiences were the main focus. Children's video clips were collated over two months, two or three days a week, based on their individual timetables. The filming targeted children's engagement with their environment and everyday activities (within free play time, indoor and outdoor activities) as they prepared for transition and so a digital camera on a tripod was placed in the room where children were, and moved according to children's choice of activity / location. The emphasis was on child-led interests and exploration rather than adult-directed prompts or staged activities. The researcher (third co-author) spent considerable time building relationships with children and staff and was in close collaboration and consultation with them throughout to ensure that children's experiences and transition processes were appropriately filmed. The Wearcams were also piloted with the support of nursery staff and attached to vests that the children wore for some of their activities. Children quickly became accustomed to these and forgot they were wearing them (for more on the practical and ethical issues of using Wearcams please see Parsons et al., 2020a and 2020b). We aimed for a balance between Wearcam footage and the standard digital cameras with the objective always being to collate footage that provided authentic insights about the child.

During the last weeks of video recording in July 2018, individual interviews with parents and staff took place at the nursery. Children's parents/carers and nursery staff members were invited to comment on camera about what they saw in selected video clips of the child as they watched them, discuss the children's likes/dislikes, comment on where support was needed, and share their thoughts and concerns about the upcoming transitions. Additionally, staff explained how they supported children's everyday transitions at the nursery and prepared for the children's transition to primary school. The project team worked closely together to decide what the main Stories with the children should be using concept mapping based on a combination of the exemplary and embodied knowledge of the child, which included identifying children's main likes and dislikes (see Parsons et al., 2020a). Draft versions of the Stories were then shared with parents, and with staff, before being finalised and approved for release. We organised a 'screening' of the Stories for the families and invited professionals from other settings. 21 Digital Stories were created capturing a range of practices, experiences and views about children's transitions (see Parsons et al., 2020a) 2. All Stories were then made publicly available on our website.

We focus here on ten of the Stories: five of which prioritised the views and perspectives of each of the individual children without adult voices, which we called 'I am...' Stories (i.e. I am Oscar; I am Oliver etc.); and five which focused on the views and perspectives of nursery staff and parents about the child, which we called 'This is...' Stories (i.e. This is Oscar; This is Oliver etc.) (the other Stories focused on the practices for supporting transitions). The 'I am...' Stories represent visual narratives about the embodied knowledge of the children based on what the viewer can *see and hear* the child doing, including via Wearcam footage; the 'This is...' Stories represent verbal narratives about the exemplary (practical) knowledge of parents / carers and practitioners based on what is *said*. Through inductive thematic analysis of these Stories, carried out by a post-Doctoral researcher (third co-author), we developed an 'I am...' Digital Story Framework (detailed in Parsons et al., 2020a) which represents the core elements of children's experiences in the Stories, namely:

- **Spaces:** where does the child like to be or explore?
- **People and interactions:** How do children like to spend their time and who do they interact with? [this was split down further into self, staff or peers]
- **Independence and agency:** What does the child choose to do for themselves?
- **Objects and interests:** What is the child really interested in and like doing?
- **Communication and expression:** In what ways does the child express themselves?
- **Support:** What behaviours show where the child needs support?
- **Skills and capabilities:** What is the child good at?

Here, our aim was to map these Framework categories across each of the 'I am...' and 'This is...' Digital Stories to illustrate the kinds of knowledge about the children that were produced. Specifically, our research question was: what is learned about each of the children when taking these different lenses on knowledge generation?

Analysis

For the 'I am...' Stories, 'transcripts of action' were produced which detailed what could be seen happening within each section of the video. For the 'This is...' Stories, a transcript of the spoken words included in the story was produced. Alongside viewing the story itself, these transcripts were then independently coded by two members of the research team: one who had been closely involved in the development of the Stories and knew the children well, and one who had been much less involved in the data collection and video editing (Principal Investigator and first author). Coding took place deductively, according to the main categories of the Framework described above, and inductively, through generating a list of verbs that illustrated the skills, actions, interactions, and capabilities of the child as seen or said.

Given the epistemological foundation of the project, the purpose of the independent coding was more akin to Denzin's (1970; cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) investigator triangulation, rather than establishing inter-rater reliability. As such, the aim was not for the

two coders to corroborate each other to come to a singular view on reality, but rather to acknowledge that the coders had different relationships with, and exposure to, the study participants and so would inevitably bring their own understanding to what was seen and said. Thus, the two sets of coding were considered complementary, and combined to generate a more comprehensive overview for each of the Stories. This aligns with Archibald's (2016; p.230) assertion that: 'The qualitative origins of triangulation favor completeness and cohesiveness over confirmation...and reside within more comprehensive explanatory or holistic frameworks'. Thus, the data below are based on the combined coding of the two investigators. For the mapping of the Framework categories, data were first compiled for each child individually, and then combined to show how the different categories were represented across the five children. The list of verbs describing the children's actions and capabilities are presented individually via word clouds for each child as it was not meaningful to combine them.

Results

(1) Mapping of the 'I am...' Digital Story Framework categories

'I am...' Stories: these ranged from 4m 23 sec to 5m 33 secs, with an average time of 5 m 1 sec. The total number of codes per story ranged from 65 to 124, with an average of 94. The overall distribution of Framework codes for each of the children within the 'I am...' Stories was remarkably similar, as can be seen in Figure 1. For all children, there was a dominance of knowledge revealed based on the 'Spaces' where children liked to be or explore, and the 'People' with whom the child liked to spend time. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of the 'People' category according to whether children were shown by themselves, with peers, or with staff members. This reveals some important differences between the children, with Luke¹ and Oscar preferring to spend time by themselves or with staff; Riley showing a preference for interacting with peers; and Oliver and Henry showing relatively even distribution across peers, self, and staff. Figure 5a shows the overall pattern of Framework categories combined across the children. As well as the dominance of the 'Spaces' (22%) and People (24%) categories, it can be

¹ The children's real first names are used here with the appropriate permissions provided by families.

seen that 'Communication and expression', 'Objects and interests', 'Independence and agency', and 'Interactions' were all fairly similarly distributed (12%-15% each). 'Support' was the least represented category in the 'I am...' Stories with 2% of the total codes.

Insert Figures 1 & 2 about here

'This is...' Stories: these ranged from 3m 52 secs to 4m 54 secs, with an average time of 4m 28 secs. The total number of codes per story ranged from 36 to 48, with an average of 41. Like the 'I am...Stories', the representation of the Framework categories for each of the children based on what staff and parents/carers said about them, were reasonably similar as shown in Figure 3. We learned about the 'People' the children like to spend time with, and about the 'Objects and interests' that they like, their 'Independence and agency' and the 'Support' that they need. In breaking down the People category (Figure 4), there are different characterisations of the children revealed relative to the 'I am...' Stories. Luke and Oscar are represented as liking to spend time by themselves, and there are no instances where interactions with peers are mentioned. For Riley, there are more examples of him preferring to do his own thing by himself compared to more examples of him interacting with peers in his 'I am...' story. Oliver and Henry are discussed as enjoying interactions with peers particularly, relative to self and adults, compared to the more even distribution across the three categories in the 'I am...' Stories. The overall pattern of Framework categories from across the five children is shown in Figure 5b. This reveals a more even representation across most categories (ranging between 12%-19%) relative to the 'I am...' Stories, with the exception being 'Spaces' at 9%, which was the category with the lowest representation.

Insert Figures 3-5 about here

(2) Mapping the skills and capabilities of children for 'I am...' and 'This is...' Stories

Generating the verbs that represented children's skills and actions resulted in lengthy and varied lists for each child. Some verbs were used repeatedly and across both coders, while others were used much less frequently. Again, the purpose was not to report a singular reality

on what was seen or talked about, but rather to combine the descriptors used by both coders to present a more holistic view of the child. We wanted to encapsulate the data in a way that would show more powerfully something about ‘who the child is’ in relation to the different lenses through which they were described. Accordingly, we chose word clouds; they have an immediacy in showing dominant keywords that describe children’s capabilities (which appear larger), while also illustrating variability and depth.

More extensive lists were produced through the ‘I am...’ story coding relative to the ‘This is...’ coding, hence why the former look fuller than the latter for each child (two examples are shown in Figure 6, with the remainder available in Supplemental Materials). Also, different emphases on children’s skills and capabilities were revealed between the two types of Stories. The dominant verb for four out of the five children in the ‘I am...’ Stories was ‘vocalising’; while the dominant verb for four of the five children in the ‘This is...’ Stories was ‘choosing’. Both verbs also appear in the other story but are less prominent. Indeed, many categories for each of the children are reflected in both kinds of story but differ in their relative emphasis (see Figure 6 and Supplemental Materials).

Insert Figure 6 about here

Reflections on the Stories by parents

The views of parents are vital for understanding the authenticity and credibility of the representations of children within the ‘I am...’ Stories. Parents were asked to share their comments about the Stories; some did this on camera and some preferred to email or audio-record their thoughts. These reflections were collated for a meta-Digital Story about the Digital Stories (see <https://autismtransitions.org/thoughts-on-digital-Stories/>). All parents valued the Stories, as summed up by Henry’s Mum: *‘To actually be able to watch what he’s doing is amazing’*. Additionally, parents felt that the Stories could improve awareness and understanding about autism and who the child is: *‘I think it would be amazing for schools and professionals to watch prior to the child’s start’* (Oscar’s Mum). Luke’s Dad commented how

helpful the Stories would have been for him in challenging the overwhelmingly negative information about autism that he received when Luke was diagnosed:

If I'd seen that two years ago it would have made me feel a lot more positive about ...Luke..., I would have felt the sky is the limit... Luke can do anything.... But at the time when you are told they can't do this and this, you think will they ever do it?

Oscar's Mum explained how difficult it is to describe a child on a piece of paper and how valuable the Stories are in helping to show who the child is:

There is too much pressure on the parents to have to try to explain what their child is like, because you can't explain in words a person, and watching the Stories would almost fast forward that getting to know them time

Similarly, Oliver's Dad noted that '*...they say a picture is worth a thousand words. It shows exactly what this child is about.*' We suggest the richness of the information conveyed through the 'I am...' Stories explains why there were many more Framework codes, and verbs, mapped to them compared to the 'This is...' Stories.

Parents' views also revealed where and how knowledge of the children (and how children express themselves) differed between home and nursery. For example, while watching the video of Oliver initiating and joining-in with other children at the nursery, Oliver's Mum commented: '*...at home he's not like that at all. Here he is like a completely different child, at home he literally separates himself from her [his sister]*'. Similarly, Riley's Mum watched him interact with other children and said: '*That is surprising...it's the longest time I've seen him with children*'. This provides valuable confirmation that children's and families' perspectives can differ in important ways and so collating a more integrated view (from different contexts and individuals) remains vital.

Discussion

In using a Digital Storytelling methodology we explored different kinds of knowledge generation about young autistic children as they prepared to transition from nursery to school. Specifically,

we wanted to create conditions where children who did not communicate in 'typical' ways could contribute their knowledge to educational planning and decision-making. We also wanted to ensure that the knowledge of families and early years practitioners about the children was adequately represented so that their expertise was not marginalised within professional discourses (see also Parsons et al., 2020b). Our methodology enabled the contribution and inspection of children's embodied knowledge via visual, video-based representations of their interactions, play, and exploration of spaces that provide insights about the uniqueness of *who the children are* ('I am...' Stories). Parents' and practitioners' exemplary (practical) knowledge was represented through their discussions about the children ('This is...' Stories). Our analysis provided a closer examination of what we learned about the children through focusing on these different ways of knowing about their experiences.

The Stories generated qualitatively different narratives about the children with different emphases. The 'I am...' Digital Stories, especially via the Wearcam footage, enabled us to get closer to children's own perspectives; to 'be with' them (Morris, 2003), and understand their embodied knowledge in ways that would be difficult to do otherwise. For example, through the Wearcam footage we could hear children's vocalisations as they explored their surroundings independently and when interacting with others; these were vocalisations that would otherwise be difficult to hear in a busy nursery. Indeed, in reviewing the Stories, nursery staff reported that they did not know some of the children vocalised in the ways that they did while playing. This perhaps explains why 'vocalising' was such a dominant verb in the word clouds based on the 'I am...' Stories of four out of five children, compared to 'choosing' which was particularly dominant in the narratives from parents and practitioners.

Through focusing on the children's perspectives, we also learned a lot more about the 'Spaces' where they liked to be and explore. This included (often) being outside and, for some of the children, being by themselves. For Luke, Oliver and Oscar it was often the case that their vocalisations were heard (via the Wearcam) when they were playing by themselves. This

provides a powerful challenge to deficit-focused interpretations of autistic children's solitary play which has been described by some as 'unoccupied...[and] without apparent purpose' (Anderson, Moore, Godfrey & Fletcher-Flinn, 2004; pp.380-381). The importance of spaces for children to express their agency and preferences is also noted in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) guidance (Standards and Testing Agency, 2018; p.17, section 3.2), which suggests that children who are:

'...at an earlier stage of development than others... may be highly active and more likely to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do in situations that are sympathetic to this inclination. This will often be outdoors.'

However, there is very little, if any, further comment on this throughout the document.

Interestingly, there was a very much reduced representation of Spaces in the 'This is...' Stories based on families' and practitioners' accounts. Thus, in taking a more creative and embodied lens *with* children's experiences such that we *see* their interactions and explorations more directly, it becomes clear *where* children can express their interests, agency and capabilities. This moves our understanding of children beyond a narrow, performative representation of attainment (what the child can and cannot do) according to the national expectations of the EYFS, and towards a wider understanding of them in context, in line with Froebelian principles. Arnott and Duncan (2019; p.1) include space as one of their core 'ecological elements' in developing a creative pedagogic culture in early childhood. For schools to which children are transitioning this could be vital information for supporting children's engagement, participation, and enjoyment and reflecting on their own pedagogic culture.

From families and practitioners, we tended to learn more about the 'Objects and Interests' that children enjoyed and times when they showed their 'Independence and Agency'. This provides an explanation as to why 'Choosing' was so strongly represented in the 'This is...' Stories. We also learned more about where 'Support' was needed for children; something that did not come out strongly in the 'I am...' Stories. This is important information that contributes to educational

planning and is perhaps unsurprising that this aspect should be discussed more by the adults involved than shown by the children. Nevertheless, it helps to illustrate our main message: that children, families and practitioners contribute different, but complementary, knowledge about children that can aid with educational planning. We liken this complementarity to Lawlor and Solomon's (2017) discussion of embodied knowledge which: 'In a figure-ground kind of way... [makes] present the capacity for connectedness while other aspects of the lived body, perhaps in this case, characteristics of autism, recede' (p.240). In other words, both kinds of narrative or story ('I am...' and 'This is...') are 'true' about the child and offer valid representations of them, but the knowledge learned about the child in each case is based on the relative foregrounding of different aspects of children's lives.

Limitations

The Stories are constructions and representations, aimed at showing particular kinds of information about the child that move beyond a deficit-focused view and towards a more holistic understanding of who the child is. They are based on in-depth collaborative and participatory work carried out over weeks and months, with a focus on five children, their families, and their educational practitioners. The creation of Digital Stories with a different conceptualisation of autism and/or of childhood would have produced very different narratives. Likewise, the inclusion of more children may have shaped the main categories identified for the 'I am...' Framework in different ways. Therefore, our approach would be limited if we claimed that our Stories represented an independent, fixed, objectively verifiable 'truth'. However, we do not make this claim and have been clear from the start about our purpose, and the positioning of the child as capable and agentic rather than as being disordered and in deficit. Nevertheless, in being constructions the Stories tell us as much about the pedagogical context of Aviary nursery (Arnott & Duncan, 2019), and different stakeholder views, as they do about the children. It is inescapable and essential that this knowledge is intertwined. We suggest this is a strength rather than a limitation of the approach since the knowledge learned is context dependent, and therefore, context aware.

Implications for research and practice

Although developed within a specific nursery setting, the 'I am...' Framework is flexible enough to reflect, and be implemented within, different contexts. We argue that it offers a way of thinking about children's development that is not tied to prescriptions about *what* this should look like or *how* children should play, communicate, interact, or explore (other than being child-led and child-centred). Any educational professional could apply the Framework through questioning, concept mapping, and observations which may (though do not have to) include the use of video clips and photographs. For example, the Framework offers a good reminder about the importance of observing children in different spaces and asking parents and practitioners specifically about this. It also offers a consistent approach to gathering information about the core elements of children's experiences which we know may differ between stakeholders. There were certainly things that parents saw their child doing in the 'I am...' Stories that were a surprise to them and so ensuring that children's perspectives are captured as authentically as possible within a naturalistic setting alongside those of parents remains crucial.

Implementing the full Digital Storytelling methodology may not be feasible for nursery settings without support; but certainly, elements of it can and are being translated into practice. The creation of Digital Stories using the 'I am...' Framework has been embedded in core practice at Aviary nursery to support transition planning for children; as KI (nursery manager and co-author) says: 'it is what we do now'. The next steps for the research have been to evaluate the inclusion of 'I am...' Digital Stories in person-centred planning meetings at the nursery during the lockdown for COVID-19 (Wood-Downie et al., under review), and to apply the 'I am...' Framework to the creation of Digital Stories for older autistic pupils with more complex needs when they transition to adult provision.

Finally, although based on a small-scale project, the 'I am...' Framework could be used for guiding thinking in ways that are not confined to formal processes or indeed to autistic children. The Framework is not about finding a way to allocate resources to need, but rather is a way of

supporting more inclusive thinking about children and their unique childhoods in ways that are not dominated by medical model discourses of disability (Dalkilic, 2020). The Framework is a tool that could be used in other settings to enable a more holistic understanding of children through actively attending to key aspects of children's and families' views and perspectives and attuning provision accordingly (Murray, 2019).

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Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ⁱ In England Level 3 is equivalent to A-Level or National Diploma; this is equivalent to Level 4 of the [European Qualifications Framework](#).

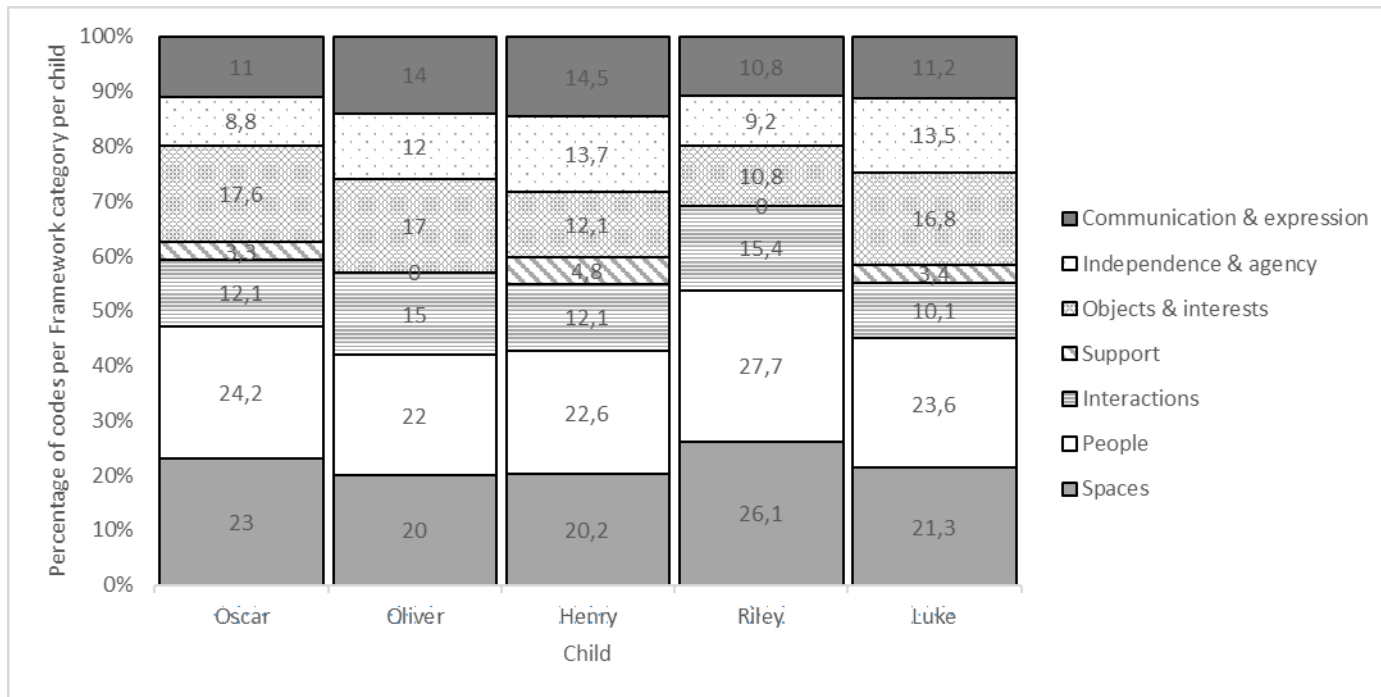


Figure 1: Percentage of Framework categories for the 'I am' Stories per child

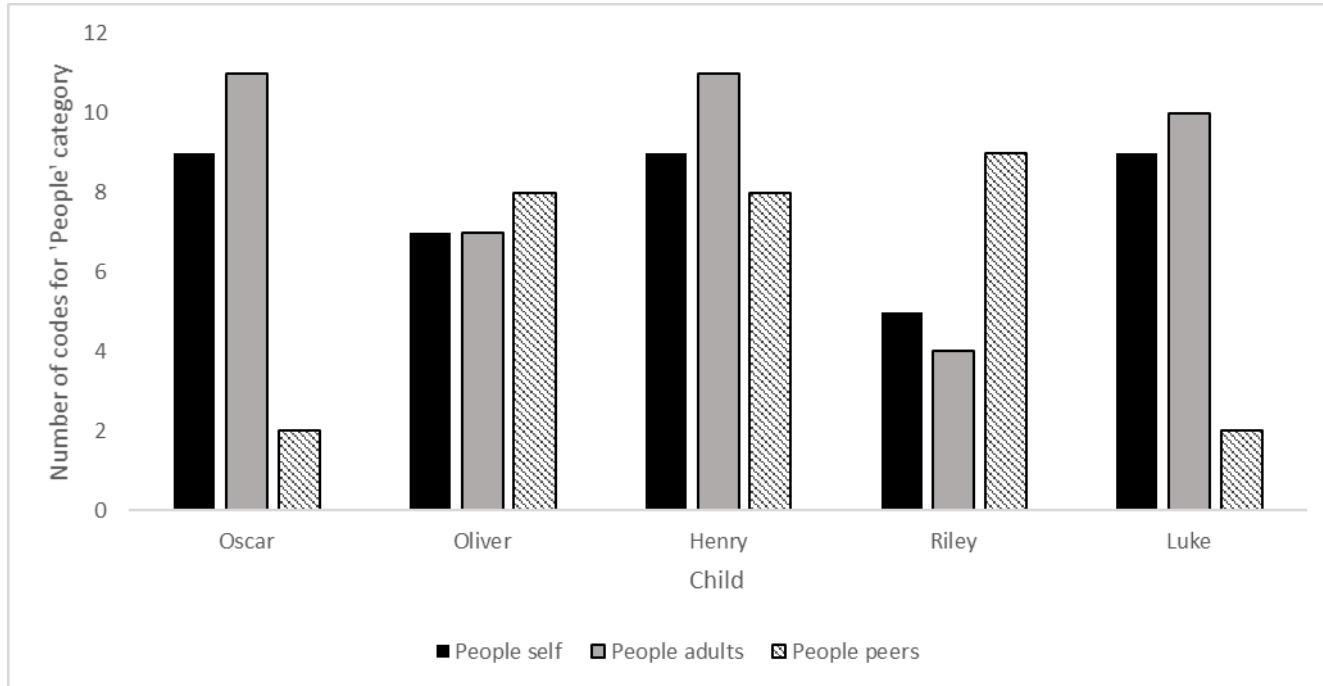


Figure 2: Breakdown of 'People' category for each child ('I am' Stories)

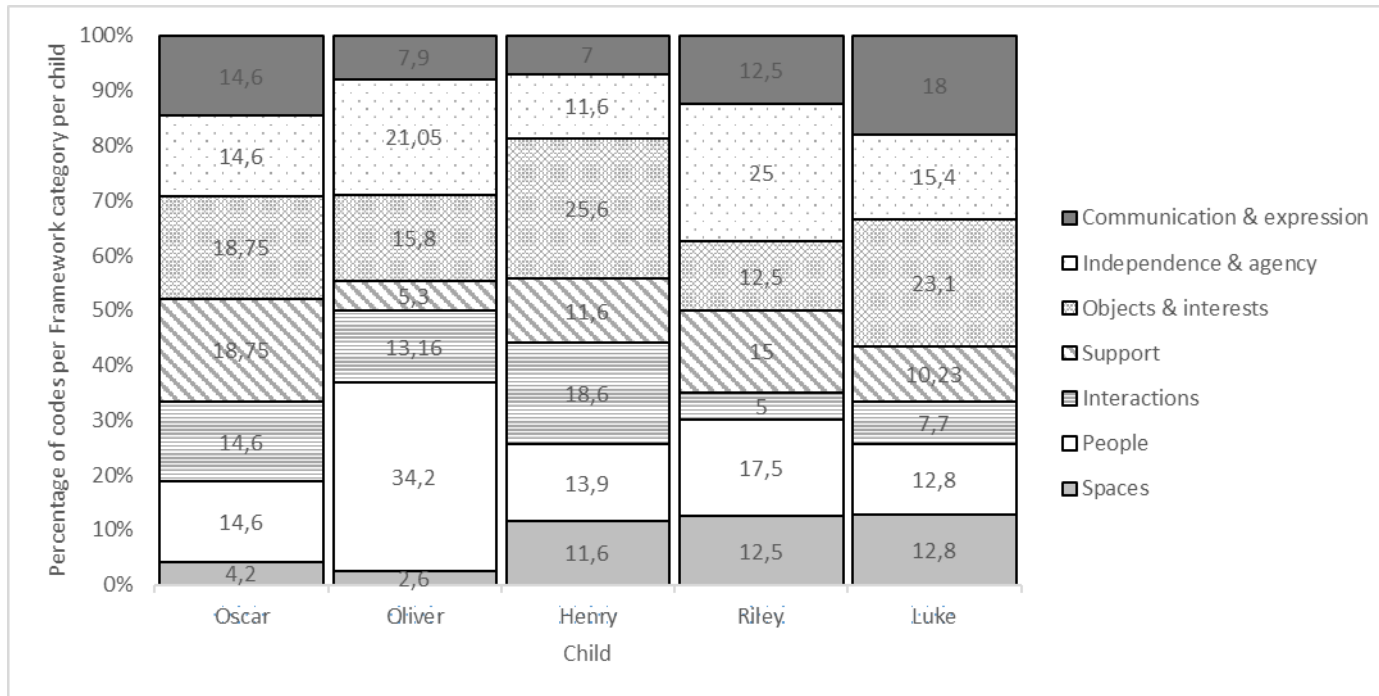


Figure 3: Percentage of Framework categories for the ‘This is’ Stories per child

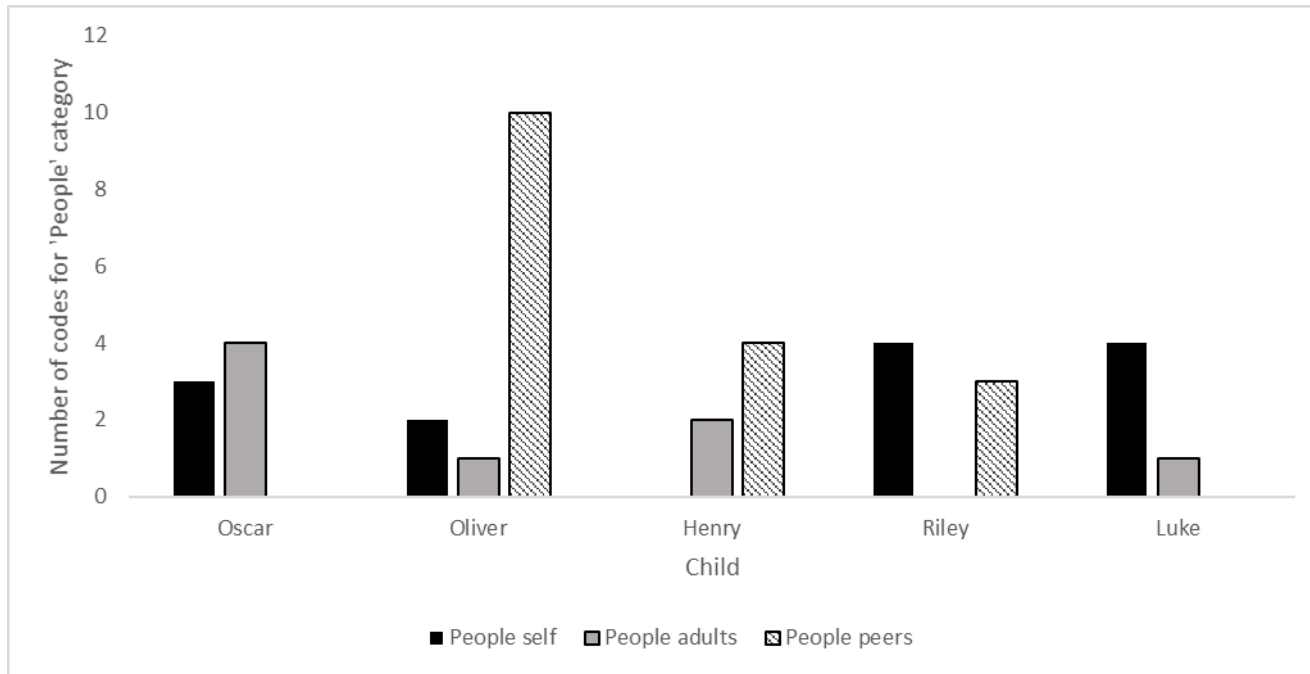


Figure 4: Breakdown of 'People' category for each child ('This is' Stories)

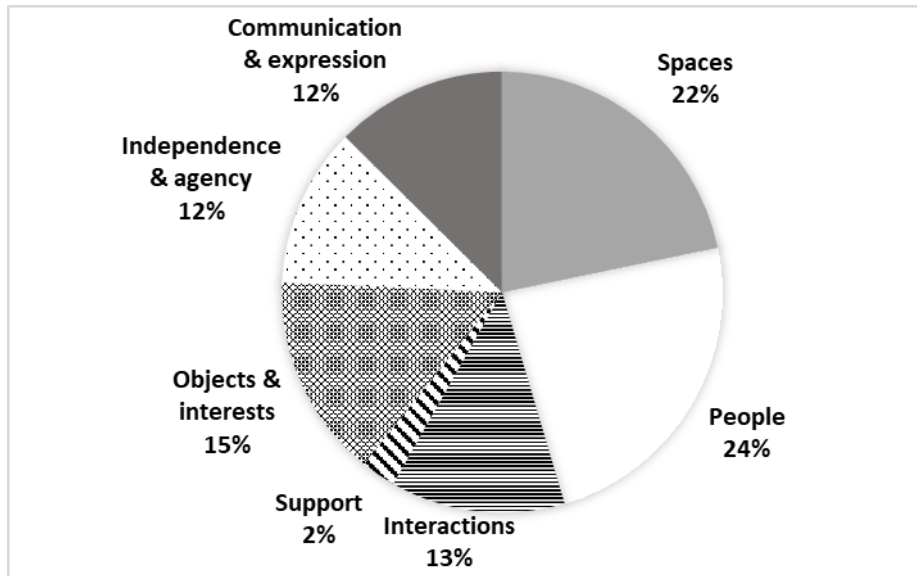


Figure 5a

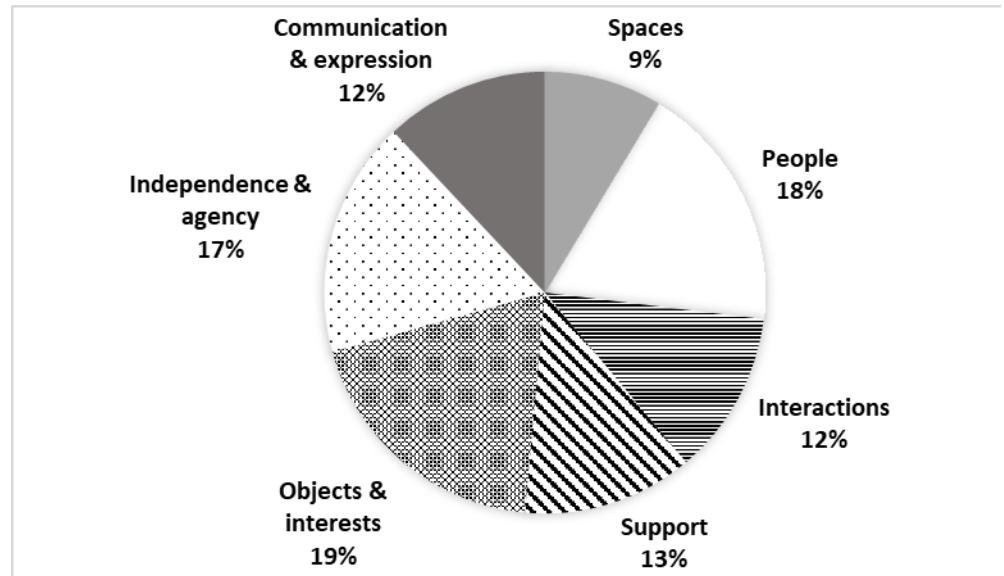


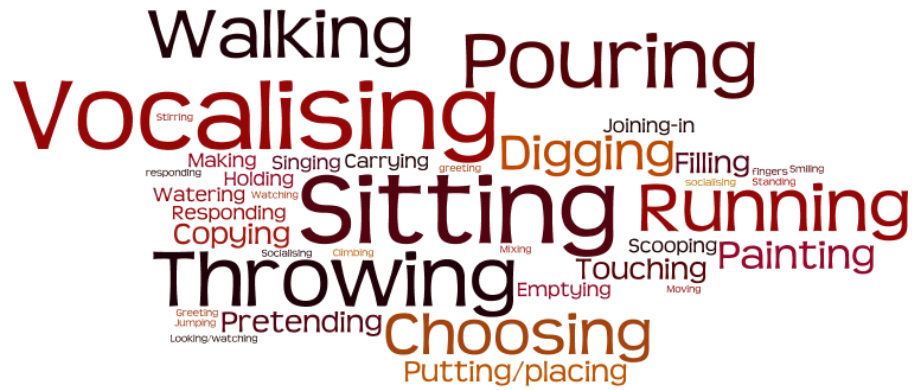
Figure 5b

Figure 5: Distribution of Framework categories for the 'I am' (5a) and 'This is' (5b) Stories [percentages are the number of codes in each category divided by the total number of codes across both coders]

Figure 6: Illustrative word clouds showing children’s skills and actions seen and talked about for the ‘I am’ and ‘This is’ Stories respectively (more frequently coded words appear larger) [see Supplemental Materials for the word clouds for the remaining children]

	I am...	This is...
Oscar		
Oliver		

Riley



Luke

