



Research Grants Final Report Form

- Name: Professor Sarah Parsons
- Institution: University of Southampton
- Project title: **The voices and experiences of children with autism, and their families, in their transitions from nursery to primary school**
- Project start date: 1st March 2018
- Project end date: 15th January 2019
- Grant reference number: N/A

1) Overview. Please provide a brief overview of your research project, including the original research objectives

Young children with autism are amongst the most scrutinised and assessed in their everyday lives, often leading to characterisations and descriptions that focus on their difficulties (commonly termed 'deficits') and challenges rather than on their abilities, strengths and positive experiences. Consequently, much discussion about children with autism tends to forget that they are children first. While research has considered the transitions of children with autism from primary to secondary school, and from secondary to post-compulsory contexts, there is almost no research focusing on transitions for young children with autism 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. This project captured, through digital storytelling, the experiences and perspectives of five young children with autism (aged 4-5 years), and their families, as the children prepared to make the transition from nursery to primary school. The setting, Aviary Nursery, is an inclusive nursery school in Eastleigh, Hampshire that prioritises children's play, interests, friendships, and different ways of communicating and interacting with each other.

Our objectives were to:

1. **Capture the voices** (experiences, perspectives, interactions) of young children with autism as they prepared for, and made, the transition from nursery to primary school;
2. **Promote the perspectives** of young children with autism, captured via digital stories, as valid evidence of experiences in their own right;
3. **Identify effective practices**, based on Froebelian principles, that support the preparation of young children with autism for transitions from nursery to primary school;
4. **Utilise the methodology and artefacts** of digital story creation as tools for sharing and promoting knowledge and understanding about effective practices for transition of children with autism;

5. **Share the methodology and outcomes** of the project online in order to inform and enable schools to engage with their own digital story creation.

2) The Grant. Please provide a summary outlining what you have achieved during the grant period, and assessing the progress of your research in comparison to your original proposal, detailing any changes in objectives, procedures or locations.

We agreed a slight extension of the project by 6 weeks to the 15th January 2019 in order to maximise the use of the budget. We completed all of our objectives to time and budget and the extension also allowed the time to follow-up with two of the children and create additional stories with them. We outline our achievements below according to our original objectives.

1. **Capture the voices** (experiences, perspectives, interactions) of young children with autism as they prepare for, and make, the transition from nursery to primary school;

This has been an extremely powerful and rewarding core aspect of the project from the perspectives of everyone involved: researchers, practitioners, and parents. We would hope that the children have enjoyed the process as well; certainly there were no signs that they were not happy with their involvement. We developed 16 stories through the main period of data collection and analysis, and then added a further 5 stories when we followed-up two of the children in their new schools.

The digital storytelling method was used to capture the experiences and perspectives of five 4-year-old autistic children, and their families, as the children prepared to make the transition from nursery to primary school. In all cases the children were delayed in their development and not able to communicate with us in typical ways. However, we feel that we very much captured their voices through the project via hours of video footage taken during the 2-3 months before their transition (i.e. before the summer holiday). The researcher, Effie, was embedded in the nursery during that time, getting to know the staff, parents and the children. The children's voices and perspectives are at the centre of the research through highlighting their unique trajectories via the individual digital stories.

We used digital cameras throughout the nursery to capture children's choices, explorations and interactions with staff and other children. A particularly innovative aspect of the project is the use of wearable cameras, which captured children's interactions and choices from their own perspectives. We also interviewed staff and parents on camera about their experiences of, and hopes and fears for, educational transitions. Working with colleagues from Aviary nursery from the start meant that a trusting and willing relationship already existed and so working with the children and families progressed very smoothly.

Parents and practitioners sum-up their views on the digital stories, and their participation in the project, in a 'Thoughts on the Digital Stories' video [<https://autismtransitions.org/video-part-2/>]. Staff commented that there were interactions and initiations that the children made that were available for review via the videos and that would have been easily missed in the busy environment of the nursery. Parents commented that they got to know their children better, and in different ways, than they did before. For example, Oliver's Mum Lindsey says:

'And for us is really good cos at home I don't see any of that. Like he does not do any messy play, he does not interact with anyone, he is completely opposite to what he is while he's here and what he'll be at school. Yeah, he keeps himself to himself, where it's getting a little bit better, but he's nothing like that. Like trying to make people do stuff with him and things like that. That's not Oliver, so seeing it, when you get told that on like a little report it's' like

'Really? Are you really just saying that to make me feel better?' But when you see it, you actually start believing, actually he is improving. So you get to see a reality of him which is better, which is nice.'

2. **Promote the perspectives** of young children with autism, as captured via digital stories, as valid evidence of experiences in their own right;

Children's perspectives and unique insights are very strongly represented in the digital stories, especially via the wearcam footage which shows their agency in making choices, initiating interactions, and using self-talk during self-directed activities. Such self-talk is not something that is easily accessible for practitioners to hear in the everyday to and fro of the nursery and so the footage from the cameras revealed how much children were saying, and how much they were enjoying activities during the day (Oscar's story is a particularly strong example of this:

<https://youtu.be/BkNbIPnfDCK>).

We developed an 'I am...' story for each of the five children, based entirely on their own perspectives and interactions and without any accompanying narrative from adults to describe what was happening. Indeed, these stories show how powerful the children's perspectives are by themselves, without the need for further explanation. It is clear what the children liked to do, how they interacted with others, and their unique actions on, and explorations of, their worlds. We think they serve as evidence in their own right and encourage readers to view each of the stories accordingly: <https://autismtransitions.org/video-part-2/> [each is about 5 minutes long].

3. **Identify effective practices**, based on Froebelian principles, that support the preparation of young children with autism for transitions from nursery to primary school;

Five of the stories focus on the practices at the nursery that are used to support children's everyday (horizontal) transitions, the preparations that are made for the vertical transition to the new school, and parents and staff members' views on this. A further five stories ['This is...'] bring together the views of parents and practitioners about each individual child, to describe more about who they are and what they are like. Through these stories, as well as the children's 'I am...' stories, there is clear alignment with Froebelian principles, as outlined further below.

Child's integrity, voice, and agency: capturing these aspects was a primary motivation and objective for the project. As noted above, we think that the 'I am...' digital stories reveal and respect these aspects of children's lives. Crucially, our aim was to challenge the medical model, deficit-focused view of autistic children that tends to dominate literature, narratives and reports about them. It is clear from the videos that these five autistic children express their wishes and preferences, have agency with regard to their choices and interactions, and give voice and expression to thoughts and feelings, albeit in ways that may not be perceived as 'typical' (which, of course, is precisely the point!). They show children's reciprocal communication with others, sometimes through song (Luke) or by their own initiation (Henry saying hello to other children and to staff). They also show the children's use of symbol communication and how effective this was within the nursery, both for children to communicate choices and for staff to communicate options and what was coming next.

Relationship to family, community, nature, culture and society: the children's families were engaged with the project from the start and involved in the development and review of the stories before any of the footage was finalised and made available publically. Families differed in the extent to which they were involved e.g. some did not want to appear on camera when reflecting on how the child's transition had gone because this was a very difficult time for them; some were not able to

come to the 'screening' where we shared the stories with other families and practitioners. Some younger siblings were present when the video footage of the child was viewed by families (and also appear in some of the stories); and two out of the five Dads were also involved in feeding back on camera (a notable achievement for an early years project). The presence of families within some of the videos shows the child's relationships in this context. Our flexible, child-centred methodology could accommodate all the different ways that children expressed themselves and families chose to be involved. All said that the project had been beneficial to them.

The stories also show children's strong engagement with nature. The Aviary Nursery is blessed with large outdoor spaces that children can explore, including grassy areas, a woodland forest school area, and plenty of bushes and flowers. Our video footage was taken during the warm and sunny summer of 2018 and so there were plenty of opportunities to play outdoors. Wearcam footage shows Oscar picking daisies and plucking the petals, talking to himself with clear enjoyment as he does so. Luke giggles to himself while picking grass, leaves and petals. Henry loves bouncing the branches on one of the trees and playing with water, which makes him squeal with delight. Oliver loves playing in the den under the trees; Riley loves making mud pies and watering the flowers.

Uniqueness of child's capacity and potential, and holistic nature of development in every child: all five of the children are on the autism spectrum but the stories show their individuality and personalities, especially in relation to the things they like doing and choose to do. The stories also show how structure and familiarity can support children to make the horizontal transitions through the day so that their capacities and potential are enabled and can flourish. For example, in the 'Practices for Everyday Transitions – Part 1' story, Riley registers as soon as he comes in, following his routine without much difficulty. In 'Practices for Everyday Transitions – Part 2', Luke is supported with the use of a PECS folder to transition smoothly to snack time.

Crucially for us, the stories really show *who the children are*. This includes some of the things that they find challenging, including Luke not liking noise and Oscar getting frustrated and running to the sandpit for refuge. These aspects of their lives are important too but the point of the stories is to ensure that there is a more holistic representation of the child that is not dominated by their difficulties. Paula Kluth (2010; p.195)¹ draws upon Cathy Apfel's work to suggest there should be a 'birthday present rule' when it comes to how we talk about and understand autistic children:

'when you read a description of learner, examine a report about him, or listen to his team discuss his profile, you should be able to generate an idea for a birthday gift for him. If you can come up with a great gift idea, you should be able to come up with good ideas for teaching materials, positive behavioral [sic] supports, and lesson formats too'.

We suggest that the digital stories are a much more meaningful and powerful way of being able to do this and that they pass the birthday present rule. We'd challenge any viewer of the digital stories not to be able to make suggestions for gifts that these children would really enjoy!

Play and creativity (as central integrating elements) in development and learning: the stories, and the activities they capture therein, are based on the play and creativity of the children and how the staff provide an environment that enables freedom of expression, choice, and exploration. Much research about young autistic children documents their solitary or functional play, and their

¹ Kluth, P. (2010) (2nd Edition) *You're going to love this kid!* Paul H. Brookes Publishing: Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

difficulties with imaginative and creative play (e.g. Jarrold, 2003)². Indeed, solitary or functional (non-imaginative, repetitive) play is usually considered problematic or lacking in some way, thereby requiring intervention (e.g. Kossyvakaki & Papoudi, 2016)³. By contrast, our stories show individual, playful expressions and exploration of the surrounding environment as well as reciprocal and creative engagement, social initiations and responses. We do not place a judgement on the individual activities as lacking or 'atypical'. Rather, what the stories show is how important these spaces and activities are for children to express their voices and agency: we see them choosing to skip along the plastic crates by themselves, play with their plastic dinosaurs or sea creatures, and feel the flow of sand or water through their fingers.

We also hear the children's voices while they do these things: giggling, singing, murmuring, babbling and chattering. There is evident enjoyment and, therefore, *value* in these activities for the children in this context. Without a close look at children's play behaviours an observer may be tempted to categorise repetitive activities as unhelpful or lacking value. Our digital stories challenge this view and also provide important insights into what play looks like from the perspectives of autistic children. For example, Luke loves threading shapes onto string and will happily do this repetitively; on one of our clips Luke picks up a banana shaped / coloured object and proceeds to thread it onto the string. Before he does so, he lifts the banana to his ear briefly and starts to talk to it. He appears to be pretending the banana is a telephone, something that Gareth (sat alongside Luke) says he missed at the time. Also, the stories show that children enjoy and are enabled to play with agency through the 'free-flow' use of space within the nursery; their play does not need to be adult led. This again challenges many of the dominant ways of thinking about and understanding autistic children's play in the research literature.

4. **Utilise the methodology and artefacts** of digital story creation as tools for sharing and promoting knowledge and understanding about effective practices for transition of children with autism;
5. **Share the methodology and outcomes** of the project online in order to inform and enable schools to engage with their own digital story creation.

We address these two objectives together as they are inextricably linked. We have created a project website [<https://autismtransitions.org/>], where the rationale, process, and outputs of the project are / will be publically available. We will continue to update this as we publish from the project and certainly intend to submit papers for publication to high-quality journals that report on the methodology and the outcomes. All of the digital stories are publically available from the website and can be used in whatever way people wish.

We initially shared the project and the stories with families and invited practitioners at a 'screening' in October 2018. This included other early years professionals (e.g. from the Portage service and schools / nurseries), colleagues from local authorities (Southampton and Hampshire), including the Inclusion Team Leader for Hampshire and Educational Psychologists; as well as some of the parents. Feedback from this was extremely positive, for example:

It was brilliant and so interesting to hear about your research and it's given us some exciting ideas about how to approach training and reflection and gaining the voice of our students at [our school].

² Jarrold, C. (2003). A review of research into pretend play in autism. *Autism*, 7(4), 379-390.

³ Kossyvakaki, L., & Papoudi, D. (2016). A review of play interventions for children with autism at school. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 63(1), 45-63.

I really enjoyed the Digital Stories and filming is something that I have been trying to get our teams to embrace for training so this really is another fantastic way to use this resource. With many of our nursery settings using Tapestry and Ipad to take photos of children, film really is a minor step on from there.

I found your work very exciting and hopefully the aviary staff will keep me up to date with any new stories and events.

I really enjoyed your presentation and am so motivated about the possibilities for the work you are doing. As a Portage team we are in contact with a wide range of children, families and settings so if there are any avenues you would like to explore I'm sure we can work with you to meet them. It's a very exciting line of work!

What you have presented was really interesting and I definitely think it will help other families so very pleased to be involved.

We both really enjoyed the digital stories event and can see just how much time and effort went into the project. It was really useful to see transition aids being used practically in another setting and also to get to know Oscar a little better. I will look forward to watching the clips!

This led directly to an invitation from the Inclusion Team Manager at Hampshire County Council asking us to contribute to a training event on March 8th 2019 targeting over 100 early years practitioners. We have also presented the work at the Scottish Autism 50th Anniversary Conference in Glasgow in November 2018, and at the Portswood Teaching School Alliance Inclusion Conference in January 2019. We have submitted an abstract based on the project to the Autism Europe conference in September 2019, and will be presenting a workshop at the Froebel Trust conference in March 2019. Details are included under section #9 below. We would love to be able to continue the work to build on the positive responses so far and enable further story creation at Aviary, and with other settings. We have some ideas about how we could do this – see section #10 below.

3) Research activity. Please detail the specifics of the research undertaken, including sources and/or methods used, and problems encountered.

The study was conducted at Aviary Nursery with five 4-year-old autistic children who transitioned to primary school in September 2018. Children's families and practitioners who work at the nursery were also involved in the study. The methodology we proposed assumed that nursery staff and parents play crucial roles in mediating and facilitating transition processes.

In early May, the staff at the nursery were introduced to the idea of digital stories during a workshop that explained the purpose of the stories, who will see them, the importance of ensuring the child's perspective and experiences stay at the heart of the stories, and their roles in supporting the creation of the stories.

Children's video clips were then collated over May and June 2018, two or three days a week, based on the children's individual timetables. The footage was targeted at showing children's engagement with their environment and their everyday activities as they prepared for transition. The video footage captured children's normal day routine activities, such as free play time, indoor and outdoor activities. Effie, the researcher, spent considerable time in the school to build relationships with children and staff in the early days of the project, and was in constant collaboration and consultation with the staff thereafter in order to ensure that children's experiences and transitions processes

were appropriately and accurately captured. In addition, the small wearable cameras that were also provided to the children by the nursery staff, were piloted and implemented with their support.

During the last weeks of video recording in July, individual interviews with parents and staff took place at the nursery. Children's mothers and four members of Aviary nursery staff, were invited to comment (on camera) about what they saw in the video clips of the child, discuss the children's likes and areas of need, and share their thoughts and concerns about the upcoming transitions. Additionally, the staff also explained how they support children's everyday transitions at the nursery and how they prepare for the children's transition to primary school (see Appendix A: Interview schedules).

The project team worked closely together to decide what the main stories with the children should be. Given the extent of the footage gathered for each child this was not a trivial undertaking. These ideas were used to create initial concept maps for the stories (Appendix B: Initial concept maps for the digital stories for each child), which were shared with our project partners at the nursery. Figure 1 below summarises the process we followed for the creation of the digital stories (boxes in orange show activities that go beyond our original plan). Froebelian principles, along with the knowledge of the child which was derived from the video clips and the feedback received from staff and parents, constituted the basis for the concept maps which then informed the selection of illustrative clips. Initially, the research team coded the video clips based on the Froebelian principles in relation to children's everyday, horizontal transitions (see Appendix C: Example of coded video clips). After this coding process, the research team reviewed the coded clips and generated some main themes for planning and structuring the stories based on the main objectives of the project (see next page). We then started creating the concept maps using evidence from the feedback received from staff and the children's parents. The concept maps provided the frameworks for identifying core aspects of story content.

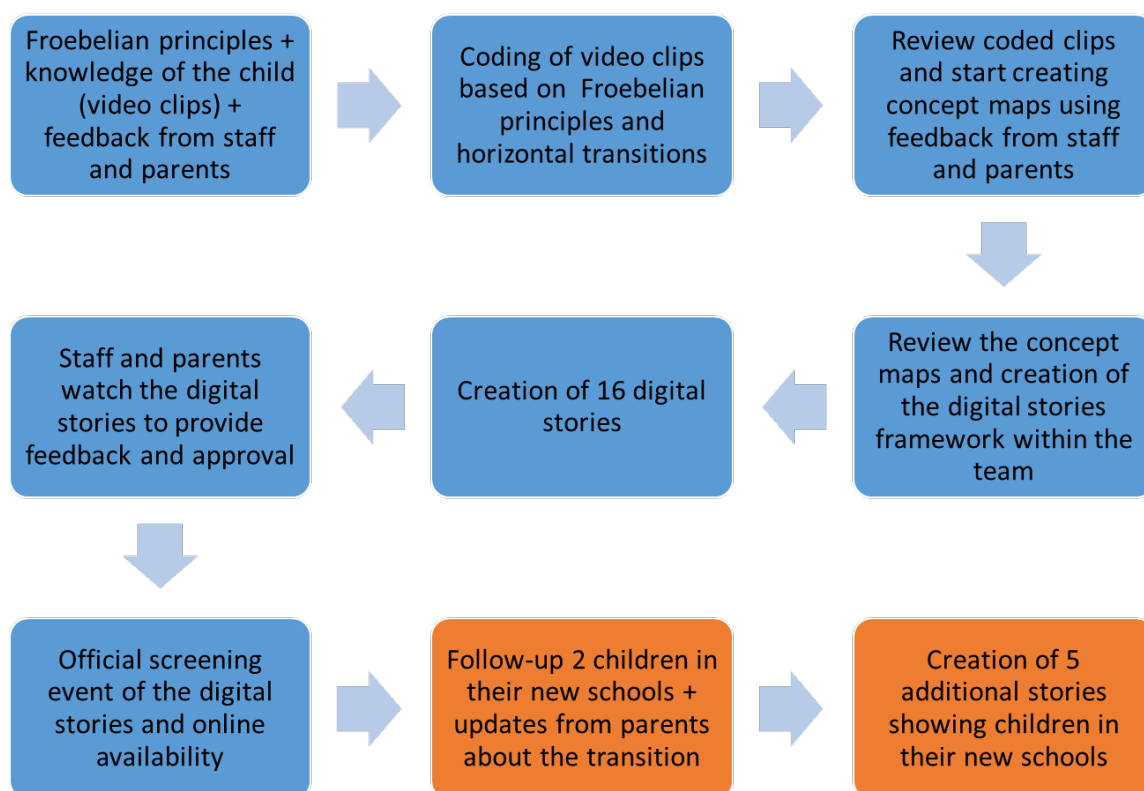


Figure 1: Process of digital story creation

The main themes for creating the initial digital stories were as follows:

A holistic focus on each child as a unique individual

The footage from children's everyday lives at the nursery and from the interviews with parents and staff enabled us to represent each child; his likes, dislikes and the things they found challenging. In addition, the wearcam footage offered evidence of children's own voices, experiences and perspectives and was incorporated into the digital stories. Together, this enabled us to pull together a more rounded, balanced and holistic representation of each child. We decided to split the stories under this theme into two main categories: (1) a story for each child based only on footage of and with them, without any accompanying adult narrative or interpretation; and (2) a story for each child from the perspectives of those who know the child best i.e. parents and practitioners who work closely with the children. These became the '*I am...*' and '*This is...*' stories, respectively.

Everyday Transitions

The footage also included practices that the nursery staff used every day for children's horizontal transitions from one task or activity to another (e.g. PECS or a visual timetable used to signal that it was nappy change or snack time). The staff also had the chance through the interviews with the researcher to comment on camera about these practices and explain in more detail the importance of children's timetables and folders (for example). Therefore, we were able to show these practices in action as well as encourage practitioners to review and reflect on them via their participation in the creation of the stories. The stories relating to this main theme were split into two parts: '*Practices for Everyday Transitions Part 1*' included the manager of Aviary Nursery and the inclusion teacher, describing some of the practices they use during everyday transitions at the nursery, such as PECS and free-flow play. '*Practices for Everyday Transitions Part 2*' included two early years practitioners describing the meaning and use of children's visual timetables and folders, and further practices for supporting everyday transitions.

Preparation for transition to primary school

The nursery staff discussed how they prepare for children's transitions throughout the year. In addition parents also expressed their thoughts about their child's upcoming transition, including their worries and concerns. This footage became three videos: '*Preparation for Transition to Primary School*' includes staff members describing how they support children's transitions to their new primary school, highlighting the importance of dialogue and communication. '*How Can Children's Transitions to Primary School Be Supported*' includes staff members describing how children's transitions could be further supported, emphasising the importance of dialogue with the new schools, the role of the digital stories in enabling that, and the importance of looking beyond the autism label. Finally, '*Parents thoughts ahead of the transition*' includes the children's mothers sharing their thoughts and concerns ahead of their children's transition to the primary school.

Thoughts about the digital stories

The nursery staff and parents shared their thoughts about the aims of the digital stories and their roles within the project. These reflections form an important feature of the digital stories as they provided insights into the value of the project from a range of perspectives, and also supported the further engagement of parents and staff. Nursery staff indicated that the project had already and would further change their practices for transitions; parents talked about how much they valued the stories of their children, what a difference the stories had made to them, and how important the stories could be in supporting transition and planning practices for others in the future. We think that this video shows very strong indications about the potential for impact that could follow from the project.

Follow-up

In addition to the original plan, and given the positive relationships developed with our participating families, we were able to follow-up two of the children once they had moved to their new school. Oscar and Henry were visited once at their new schools (both mainstream primaries) at the end of November - early December 2018, i.e. around 3 months after they had started. We also repeatedly tried to gain access via the schools to follow-up Luke, Riley, and Oliver – all of whom had moved to the same special school. However, we did not receive any replies from the school to our invitations for them to take part, even though parents were very supportive of this. This was the only real challenge that we felt we encountered in the course of the project and perhaps speaks most strongly about the value of working with practice contexts right from the start of any project.

Due to limited time until the end of the project, and considering the amount of time and effort needed for the editing and preparation of the digital stories, it was not possible to have more visits to the two schools. However, during these visits video recording of children's daily tasks and activities took place, while children's class teachers provided useful information (via interviews) about the children's transitions, any difficulties they have experienced, their everyday schedule at school and relationships with peers. In addition, Oscar's and Henry's parents also updated us about their children's transition to the new school (via an interview and/or emails).

The follow up digital stories that were created described how Oscar and Henry settled in to their schools, their daily life there, the progress they have made and their relationships with peers. An additional, very short, digital story was created for Oscar, in which his class teacher and the school's SENCO talked about his upcoming transition to a special school. Although Oscar's Mum was happy about how the transition to mainstream primary had gone, and how the school had supported Oscar, she wanted a special school place because she felt this would better meet his needs over the longer term. She successfully appealed at tribunal which meant that Oscar was about to transition again.

4) Conclusions and achievements. Please describe the extent to which objectives were met, the conclusions reached, the degree to which an original contribution to theoretical and/or practical knowledge has been achieved, and an assessment of the significance for other research in the field.

The previous sections show clearly how we were able to meet, and indeed exceed, the objectives of the project. Our overall conclusion is that a jointly constructed project such as this, between researchers and practitioners, is a highly successful way of working that has enabled strong participation and engagement of children, families and staff throughout - resulting in powerful and valued outcomes. As such, there are some important contributions that we make to the field.

Theoretically and conceptually we have gathered evidence that challenges deficit-focused interpretations and understandings of young autistic children's agency and voices in the research literature. This evidence also challenges the limiting narratives of autistic children's play by clearly showing the pleasure and enjoyment they derive from play *on their own terms*. Through placing a Froebelian lens on children's interactions, activities, and communication there is a holistic, child-centred focus to the outcomes of this project that is largely absent from other research and literature. These are original contributions to the best of our knowledge. We could find very little peer-reviewed literature that connects Froebel with autistic children, or with an inclusion agenda more broadly.

Methodologically we also make a strong contribution to knowledge. The co-construction of the project is an important approach both practically in terms of how research is done and who is involved, and conceptually in relation to where and how research knowledge is curated, interrogated, and shared. As already noted, this has supported a strong project with potentially impactful findings. The strength of the co-construction is further evidenced in the implementation of novel ideas. For example, it was Gareth Shaw – the Inclusion Teacher at Aviary – who came up with the idea of using the wearcams to capture children’s interactions from their perspectives. Likewise, it was the nursery staff who were willing to try these out and make sure the data collection happened. These were pivotal roles, without which the project would have been much poorer.

Practically, we feel we are in a strong position to contribute knowledge on the effective practices that can support children’s horizontal and vertical transitions in an inclusive nursery. By placing children’s perspectives at the heart of understanding and illuminating practices, it is clear that the practices identified are enabling and supportive for children. This can be very helpful for staff at Aviary nursery and beyond to see. Anecdotally, for example, when we presented this work to practitioners in January 2019 one commented how useful it was to see PECS symbols contained in folders that could be carried by staff and / or children to support communication and decision-making as they moved around the nursery: *‘I would never have thought of doing it that way’*. We think there is further potential for contributions to practice and say more about this in section 10 below.

5) Learning. Please provide your personal evaluation of the research project, including any lessons learned, which elements have more successful and which have been less successful.

The previous section summarises some of the main aspects of our learning from the project in academic terms. In addition, we include comments in this section from colleagues at Aviary about their learning from the project:

“This project provided a real insight into the Froebel approach already happening within the nursery, as well as the opportunity for three nursery practitioners to visit The Annan Froebel School in East Sussex. This gave us a real experience and some more ideas about how the approach works in ‘real life’.

The videoing of the children and subsequent footage from the ‘wear cams’ were both enlightening and more successful than we first thought. The digital stories that evolved from the editing of the footage, the input from parents and staff and the children themselves, were the most powerful things I have been privileged to be part of. The success of the digital stories as a ‘voice’ for the child was intense and effective, capturing things we were not aware of as mere observers of the child.

As I supported each parent that was involved with the project during their interviews, I was quite tired by the summer and did not realise the emotional cost to them when talking about their child. This did however make me realise how important capturing the child voice is, and how it can help a parent explain and understand their child.

This is something we would like to do for all our children who are unable to voice their views through speech, although the time element for editing and collating the footage will probably make it unsustainable. We will however, see what we can do. It was a valuable experience for the nursery and myself and has reignited the importance of research as a tool to influence practice immediately, not in a few years’ time.”

6) Ethical issues. Did you encounter any ethical issues during the grant period, and if so, how did you overcome these?

All of our work was completed, as would be expected, with full ethical approval from the University of Southampton. This includes an amendment to the original project so that we could conduct the follow-up work with children, teachers, and families (Ref# 31478.A3). Consent from staff and families included agreement that individuals' first names could be used in the videos, including the children's names. In the process of conducting the research, we were fully mindful of those children who were not the five focal children but their peers at the nursery. Permission from parents of these children was also obtained for the children to be shown in the videos.

The main ethical issue came in the follow-up of the children and served as a powerful reminder about the importance and strength of personal relationships and experiences that underpin sensitive social research. One of the children in particular had experienced a very difficult transition to primary school such that he was unwilling to attend, and his Mum had given up work in order to support him. She came in to the nursery to view the stories before we finalised them and made them publically available. She was very upset and found it difficult to talk about what was happening. She was clear though that she was not upset with us but with how the transition had been experienced by the child. She was still very happy with the stories and for them to be shared. Understandably, she did not want to appear on camera talking about how difficult the transition had been and so subsequently sent us her thoughts via email. Even though this was a challenging time for her, she was still willing to contribute to the project.

All of this needed to be handled very sensitively, in the moment, serving as a reminder that research ethics is much more about managing the often unexpected and nuanced aspects of research (with real people in real contexts) rather than the technical aspects related to administration and paperwork.

7) Implications. What are the implications for this work? Please include details of any anticipated changes to policy and/or practice as a result of this research.

It is probably too early in the completion of the project to be able to say very much about this but we are hopeful that changes could take place based on the feedback so far. First, colleagues from Aviaary are determined to keep filming the children they support and we have used part of the project budget (ring-fenced for equipment) to provide a digital camera and peripherals for them. Our other ACoRNS partners have been very impressed with the work and are keen to find ways to incorporate some aspects into their work, especially the use of the wearcams. Second, our contact at Hampshire County Council who has invited us to a training session in March 2019 has already signalled in an email that she is keen to encourage more use of video in supporting the transitions of children across the County:

As discussed, I am delivering a workshop on Autism: change, transition and Loss at our Early years conference in March and I would love to share your research and films to get this started with the potential for some of our very young children having a film for transition in the summer.

We will obviously continue to explore these possibilities and discussions to see what can be developed further.

8) Other funding. Have any other funding bodies supported this research project? If yes, please provide details.

Yes – the project was supported by a student summer internship that was 30% funded by the University's Excel placement programme, and 70% by internal funds from the School of Psychology. Hampshire County Council also supported Aviary Nursery staff to visit the Annan School in West Sussex.

9) Publications and other outputs. Please provide a list of any publications which have already appeared, been accepted for publication or are to be submitted for publication and give details of any other sort of dissemination of the results of the research, which has taken place or is planned (i.e. lectures, seminars, conferences, exhibitions). Copies of publications should include acknowledgement of Froebel Trust support and should be sent as attachments with this report.

We have not yet drafted or submitted any papers from the project but fully intend to do so in the coming months. Specifically, we think there are at least three papers to be generated from the project, one each focusing on the theoretical / conceptual, methodological, and practical contributions from the research along the lines summarised above. The main cross-cutting theme for these papers will be a Froebelian inspired framework for generating, interpreting, and constructing digital stories to support autistic children's (horizontal and vertical) transitions. We will also continue to disseminate the project where the opportunities arise, and update the website.

Our presentations so far / in the pipeline are:

- Sarah Parsons, Hanna Kovshoff, Kathryn Ivil, Gareth Shaw, & Efstathia Karakosta: 'The voices and experiences of children with autism, and their families, in their transitions from nursery to primary school'. Oral presentation at the 50th Anniversary Scottish Autism Conference - *Innovation in Autism Practice: The Future is Calling*, 8th- 9th November 2018, Glasgow.
- Sarah Parsons, Hanna Kovshoff, Kathryn Ivil, Gareth Shaw, & Efstathia Karakosta: 'Preparing for transition from nursery to primary school: the voices and experiences of young children with autism, and their families'. Workshop given at the *Portswood Teaching School Alliance Inclusion Conference: 'This is me'*, January 11th 2019, Southampton. [see Appendix D: Feedback from the Portswood Teaching School Alliance Conference].
- Sarah Parsons & Kathryn Ivil: 'Using digital stories to capture the voices and experiences of children with autism, and their families, in their preparation for transition from nursery to primary school'. Workshop for the *Froebel Trust conference: stories from research and practice*, University of Roehampton, 2nd March 2019.
- Sarah Parsons & Hanna Kovshoff (on behalf of the team): to run two workshops on the project with Leigh Chinery (Inclusion Team Manager, Hampshire County Council) at a local authority training event for early years practitioners, March 8th 2019 (in preparation).
- Sarah Parsons, Kathryn Ivil, Efstathia Karakosta, Hanna Kovshoff, & Gareth Shaw: The voices and experiences of children with autism, and their families, in their transitions from nursery to primary school. Abstract submitted to *Autism-Europe Congress 2019*, 13th-15th September, Nice, France.

10) Future plans. Please describe any future research plans in this field for those involved in the project.

As noted above, we would very much like to find ways to continue this work and to build upon what we have started. There are two main, interconnected, ways in which we think there are possibilities for development: (1) providing a way for other nurseries and providers to create their own digital stories using our framework; and (2) using the materials and knowledge we have co-created so far to develop an online toolkit (including the output of (1)) to support training opportunities for practitioners.

- (1) We think that one of the most important next steps will be to develop a way to support practitioners to easily initiate the development of their own digital stories for transition based on our framework. We know from many discussions that using video within settings is relatively easy; it is having the time (or budget) to edit and collate clips that is the main challenge. We know that busy colleagues will not have the time to do this. Therefore, we want to develop and pilot a way of enabling nurseries to be able to use the digital stories method / framework to support children's transitions through providing a digital innovation platform that would enable the upload and integration of video footage in a way that makes it easy for them. This would be proof-of-concept at this stage, and free of charge for nurseries, but could be income generating eventually if we could connect it up with opportunities for continuing professional development (see below). We have some ideas about the initial scoping and development work that would be needed to achieve this (in collaboration with our colleagues from IT-Innovation at the University) but we will need to secure some funding to be able to do this work.
- (2) We also think there is an opportunity to develop a toolkit of online resources, including the digital stories themselves and also (hopefully) the digital platform, to support training for early years' practitioners on inclusive early years' environments. This could be augmented with face-to-face training sessions perhaps and offered at the University, or it could be offered in other ways. It could be badged and supported by the Froebel Trust as a way of promoting Froebelian principles. This could potentially be something for which there is a charge that then supports the ongoing work envisaged for (1), perhaps using a social enterprise model. We are very open to discussions about how we could develop something like this and are already in touch with the University's Business Engagement Manager to explore possibilities.

Appendix A: Interview schedules

Interview schedule for practitioners

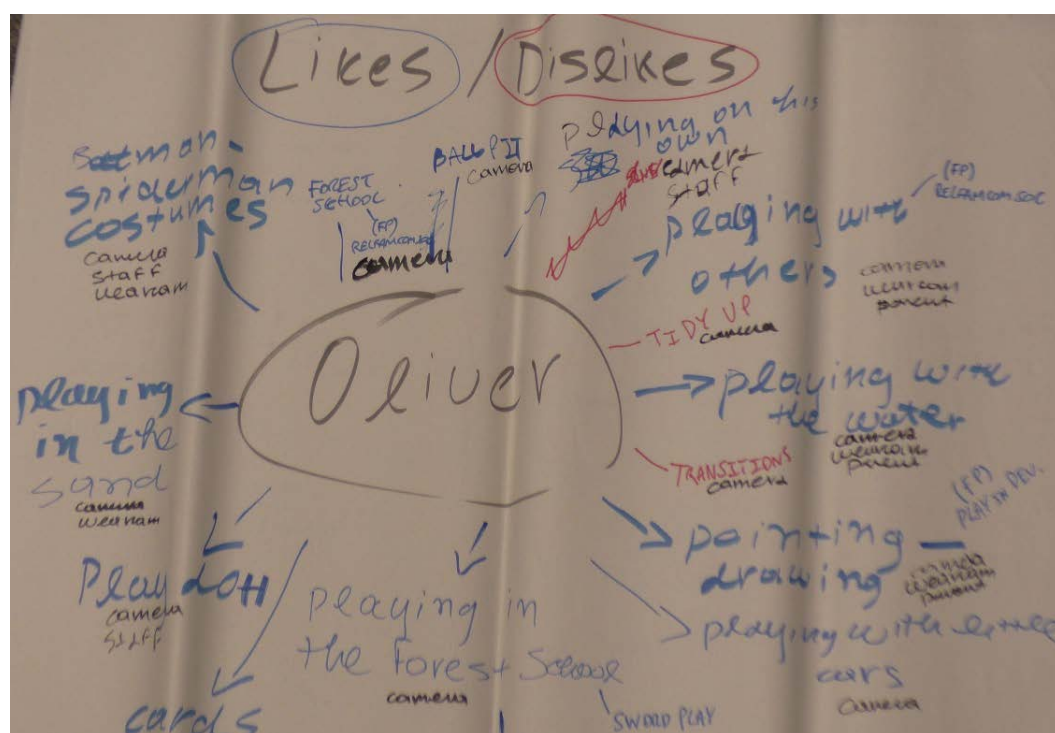
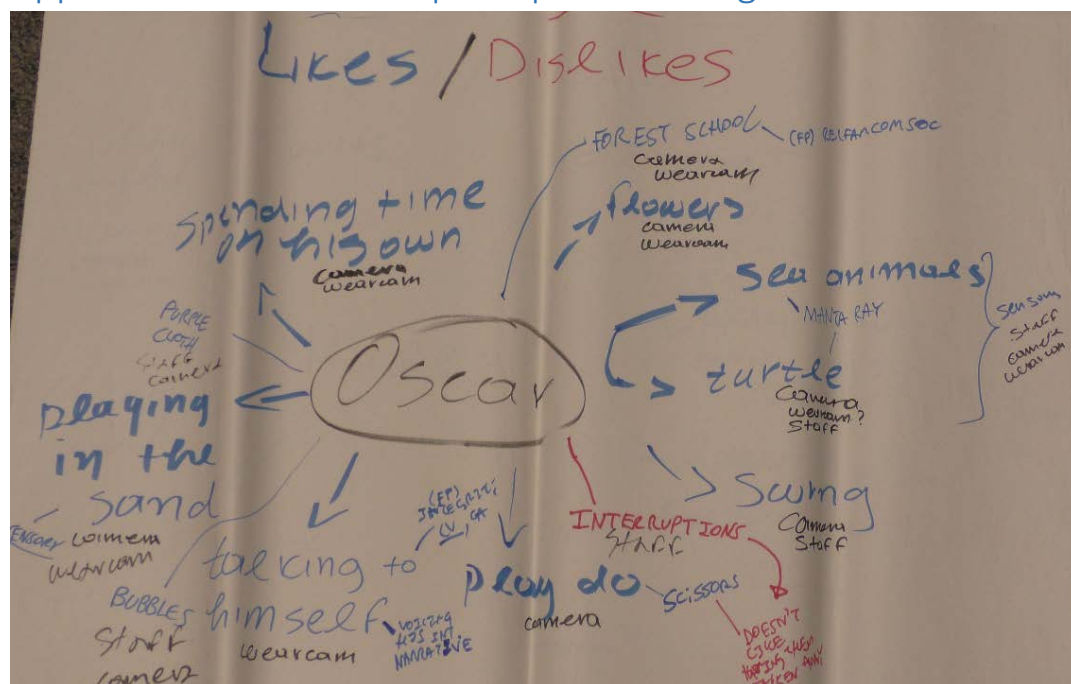
1. Can you please start by explaining your job role to me?
2. How do you approach the planning of your sessions with the children? Who decides about the activities – the child or you?
3. Please can you tell me what (name of child) is like? How do they enjoy nursery? What are their main challenges at nursery? What particular activities do they particularly like and enjoy at nursery?
4. What do you do to support the child through daily transitions? (moving the child from one activity to another).
5. What planning and specific practices are in place to support the child through big transitions? (e.g. moving up in the nursery/moving to primary school).
6. Now that you know which school each child will be attending in September, how do you feel about that? Did you have any visits from the school each child will be attending?
7. From your experiences of preparing children for transition to their next school, what do you think works well? What does not work so well? Can you think of any specific examples to help me understand the kind of things you mean?
8. Can you think of anything else that could be done to support the child's transition to their next school?
9. What practices are in place to support parents and families through big transitions at Aviary nursery? Are these effective? Can you think of anything else to support the family whose child is transitioning?
10. What are your thoughts about the aims of our digital stories? (Each member of teaching staff will be shown sort clips of every child involved in the stories)
11. Apart from what you have already told us, what are the really important things about each child that we need to make sure we include?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences of supporting children with autism to transition to new schools?

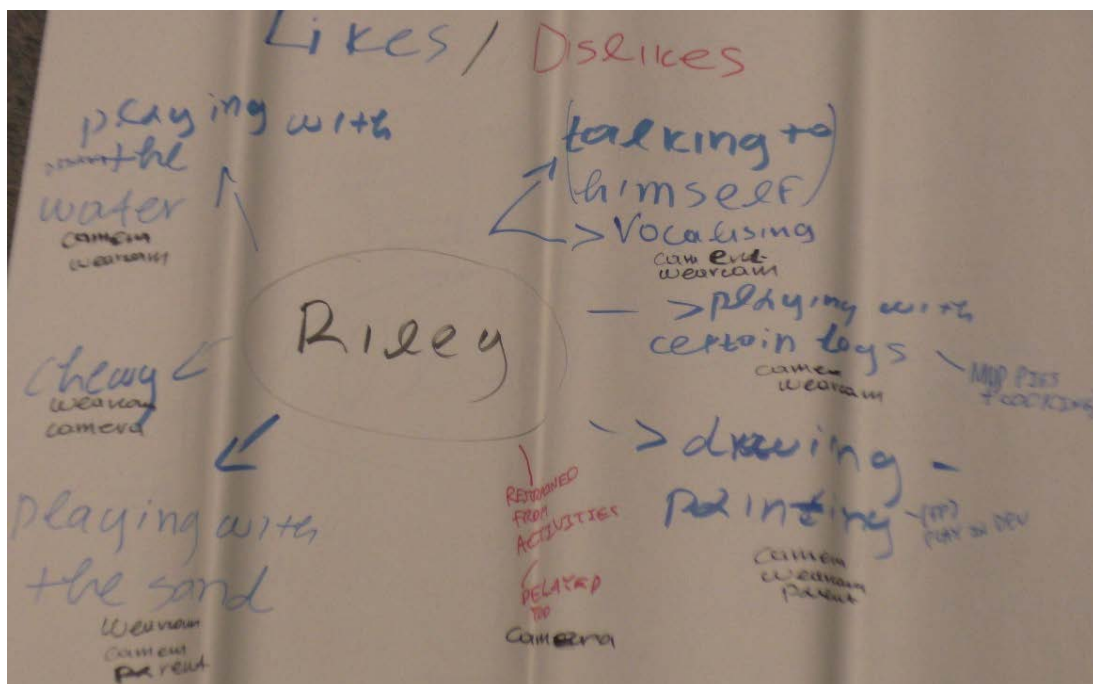
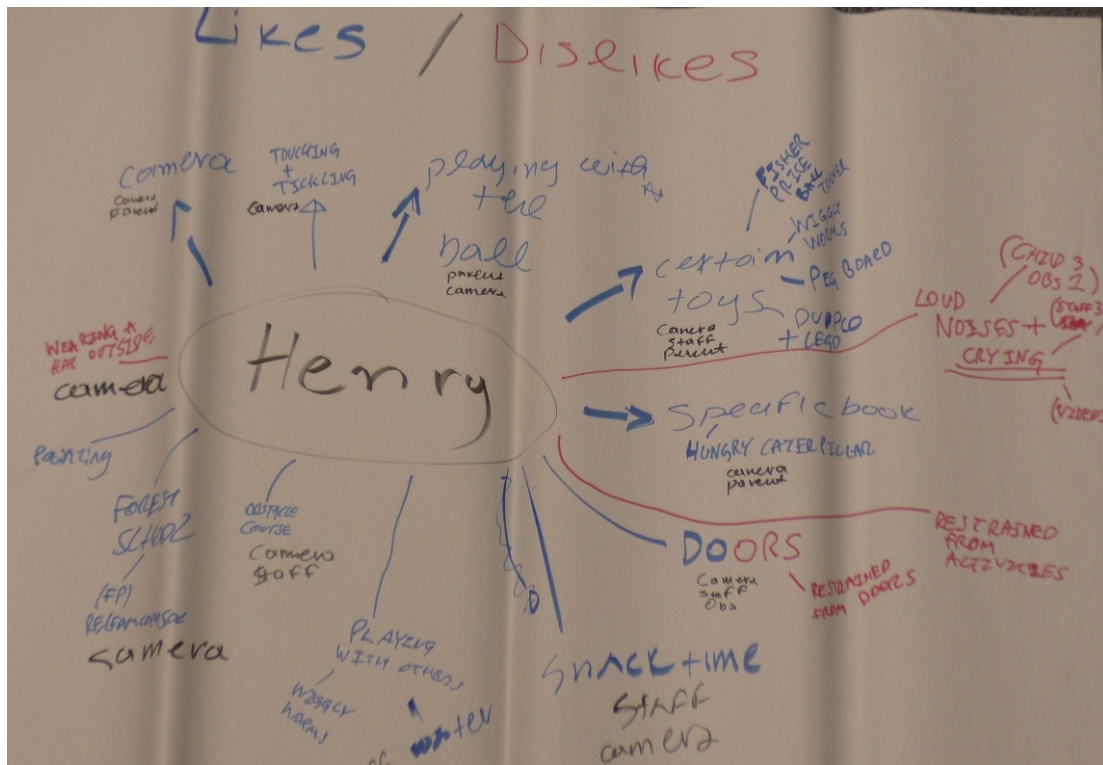
Interview Schedule for Parents

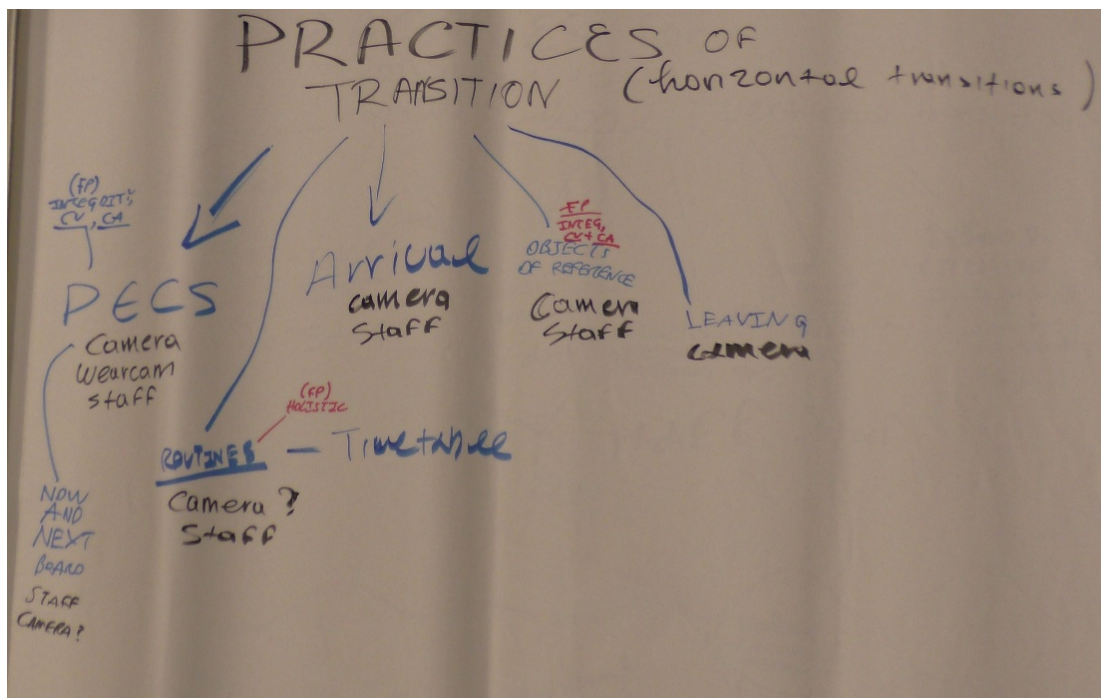
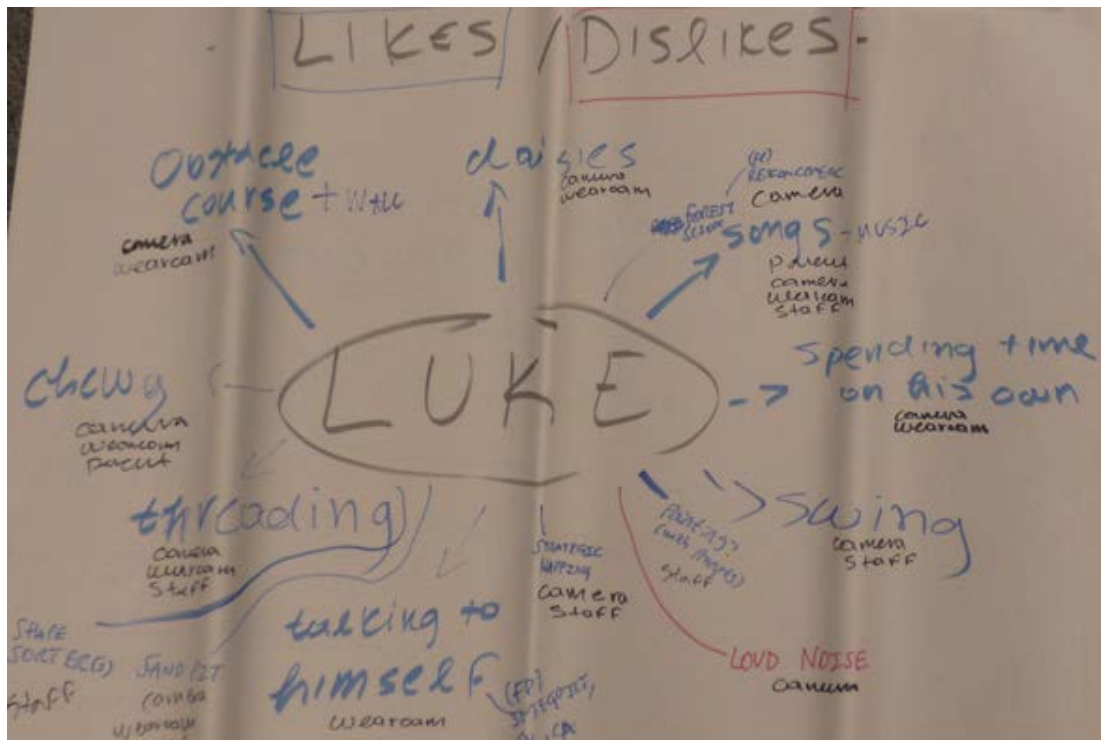
1. Please can you tell me about (name of son/daughter) and their experience at nursery generally? Do they enjoy coming to nursery? What are their likes and dislikes?
2. When did your child start coming to nursery? How well did your child settle into nursery?
3. Did you have a preference about whether your child will be transitioning to a special school or a mainstream school? Can you say more about your choice?
4. Now that you know which school your child will be attending in September, how do you feel about that?

5. Did you have the chance to visit the primary school of your child? (If yes, would you like to tell me what do you think about it? – If not, do you intend to visit the school?)
6. What are your biggest hopes about your child moving to primary school? What are your child's biggest hopes do you think?
7. What are your biggest concerns/fears of your child moving to primary school? Does your child have any concerns/fears, or have any worries?
8. What are the challenges that you think you and your child may be experiencing during the transition process?
9. What support is available at Aviary nursery to help you for the transition process? Do you think the support is helpful?
10. Do you think there is anything Aviary could be doing differently to support you and your child to prepare during transition to school?
11. What are your thoughts about the aims of our digital stories? (Each parent will be shown sort clips of his/her child)
12. Apart from what you have already told us, what are the really important things about your child that we need to make sure we include?
13. Is there anything further you'd like to add about your child's experiences of education and support so far?

Appendix B: Initial concept maps for the digital stories for each child







Appendix C: Example of coded video clips

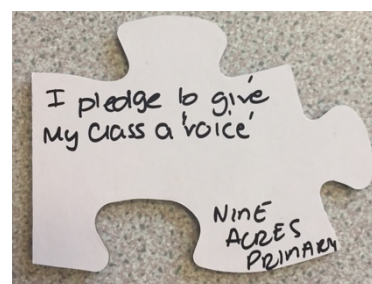
Coding footage from 07/06/2018 – Henry and Oscar

- Video clip 08 – Oscar, Henry (mostly Oscar) – 07:50-08:13
 - o Small Transition – Oscar is going to nappy change
 - o *Integrity, Child's voice, Child's integrity* – Oscar is led to nappy change by a member of staff; presumably the nappy brought along was used as an object of reference (07:50-08:13)
- Video clip 011 – Oscar – 02:55-03:30; 09:55-10:45
 - o *Play and Community* – staff tries to lead Oscar to the tree to do climbing; unsuccessful at first, then succeeds;
 - o *Integrity, Child's voice, Child's agency* – staff member unsuccessfully tries to lead Oscar over to tree-climbing, then manages to coax him over (02:55-03:30); another staff member tries to get him to join in with branch-shaking by verbal prompts, but is unsuccessful (06:05-06:25); snack transition with Oscar being led to the hut (09:55-10:45); transition to wash hands with guiding by staff (10:50-11:15)
- Video clip 014 – Henry
 - o *Relationship to family, community, nature, culture and society* – not a transition but a rather charming scene between Henry and a staff member (00:15-00:35)
- Video 017 – Oscar, Henry – 00:30-50; 02:30-40
 - o Small Transition – leaving the forest school; the forest school rendition of the “finishing song” is sung (00:30-00:50)
 - o *Integrity, Child's voice, Child's agency* – PECs card used to back up verbal instruction that it's time to go up to Sunflowers (02:30-02:40)
- Camera 2 – video clip 05 – Oscar – 03:25-03:40
 - o *Play and Community* – playing with various toys
 - o *Integrity, Child's voice, Child's agency* – staff member puts egg away in toy box, says “finished”, repeats “finished” (03:25-03:40)
- Camera 2 – video clip 06 – Henry, Oscar – Henry, 00:40-45; - Oscar, 05:25-45; 06:05-25; 07:00-20
 - o *Play and Community* – various games –Oscar really enjoying himself (05:25-05:45; 06:05-06:25); finishing song (07:00-07:20)
 - o *Integrity, Child's voice, Child's agency* – Henry – staff member takes book from Henry to join in with family time (00:40-00:45)
- Camera 2 – video clip 07 – Oscar – 00:00-15; 00:25-35
 - o Small Transition – going home – staff leading Oscar out by hand (00:00-15), then hands him to another member of staff (00:25-00:35)

Appendix D: Feedback from the Portswood Teaching School Alliance Conference

Inclusion Conference 2019 **This is Me!**

To develop inclusive practice in schools so that together we can increase achievement and attendance while diminishing the difference for vulnerable children



Workshop	Preparing for transition from nursery to primary school: the voices and experiences of young autistic children and their families
Speaker:	Prof. Sarah Parsons
Key messages	• ACoRNS stands for Autism Community Research Network @ Southampton, and includes Education and Psychology at the University, the Aviary Nursery (LA owned), and mainstream and specialist provisions. • Aviary Nursery – very inclusive and support a lot of children with additional needs. They wanted the schools to have a better understanding of the children as people rather than just the difficulties on the EHCP. • Nursery to primary is a huge transition therefore the project used digital story telling to try and give a more real picture of the child rather than focussing on what they can't do, particularly when these children can't voice their own views and opinions. • Aims for the project includes: capturing voices, focus on the whole child, promote different perspectives, identify Froebel in practice, share knowledge and methods, transitions. They attached cameras on the children and had them in the nursery. This produced a lot of footage!! • I am... stories are purely from the child's perspective – this allowed a greater insight into what they did during interactions with toys. This is... stories are from parents / staff perspective. • Every day transitions – this includes all the tiny ones. Strategies used: timetable (portable), now and next board, photo or object used. Visual cues aids understanding. Folders are used for the children to communicate what they want. Timers used and resources ready in place for next activity to avoid delays. Limit transitions to the important ones. • Project demonstrates possibility but more funding is needed. • Next steps – creating a platform / framework around each type of digital story which would be freely accessible and easy to use which could be shared.
Resources References	https://autismtransitions.org/ Digital stories can be accessed here http://acornsnetwork.org.uk/
What went well	Hearing about ACoRNs and what they do Interesting to see 'I am' videos and what this shows of pupils Very interesting about the use of technology All of it Value of recorded evidence The need to support transitions Flyer to school and playgroup Brilliant ideas I will speak to my team about the project
Ideas to follow up	Information about transitions – find out more about what they do and pass on details if appropriate