

Building pathways to impact together: benefits and examples of close to practice research

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ACoRNS



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

Today's talk

Introduce myself and my work
with the Autism Community
Research Network
@Southampton [ACoRNS]

Highlight core principles and
practices that underpin our
'close to practice' work

Share some examples to
illustrate benefits and challenges



“Education is...about practice - and the science must develop its roots at this practical level...our landscape of inquiry exists not at the level of those big “what works” questions but at the level of personalized questions posed locally”

(Thomas, 2012; pp.41+ 46)

Thomas, G. (2012). Changing our landscape of inquiry for a new science of education, *Harvard Educational Review*, 82(1), 26-51.

Schools at the centre of educational research in autism: Possibilities, practices and promises

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Commentary – bridging the research and practice gap in autism: The importance of creating research partnerships with schools

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Editors

Sarah Parsons and Connie Kasari

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BERA-RSA (2014) Inquiry into the role of research in teacher education

‘...teacher researchers and the wider research community [need to] **work in partnership**, rather than in separate and sometimes competing universes...[and that]...wherever possible teachers are **active agents in research**, rather than passive participants.’

<https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/BERA-RSA-Research-Teaching-Profession-FULL-REPORT-for-web.pdf>

ACoRNS addresses challenges for autism research

- Educational (and many other) outcomes and experiences of autistic children are often poor
- A very medical model of autism (focusing on ‘fixing the deficits’) and of evidence-based practice where knowledge based on experimental designs is prioritised
- Children’s voices, and practitioner expertise, often left out of research and practice
- Significant research-practice gap in the autism field persists
- An assumption that knowledge transfer or exchange is the answer
- Research questions derived from practice are often not prioritised



Research-practice partnership to improve the lives and experiences of autistic children and young people

Transitions and trajectories in education & other services

Established in 2016



University of
Southampton

Key people



Co-Director: Hanna Kovshoff
Professor of Neurodiversity
(School of Psychology)



Key stakeholders and Steering Group: professionals
and students from a range of sectors and
backgrounds

Core principles: Values-led ACoRNS research

Addressing marginalisation and underrepresentation (social justice and inclusion)

Participatory approaches and methods (collaborative and creative)

Voices and experiences of autistic children and young people are central

Research questions come from practice and are often negotiated with practice-based partners

Making a difference to practice

Language and terminology matter

Parsons, S. Kovshoff, H., & ACoRNS partners (2019) Building the evidence base through school-research partnerships in autism education: the Autism Community Research Network @ Southampton [ACoRNS]. *Good Autism Practice*, 20(1), 5-12.

<https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/429764/>

Evidence comes from knowledge co-creation



The synthesis of ideas from research, theory and practice in a values-led way that forms conceptual and practical tools for impacting methods in research and practice

“Encompasses new knowledge creation (the what) through the shared endeavours of research and practice working together equally (the how)”

- Parsons et al., (2022; p.1065)

'Across the great divide'

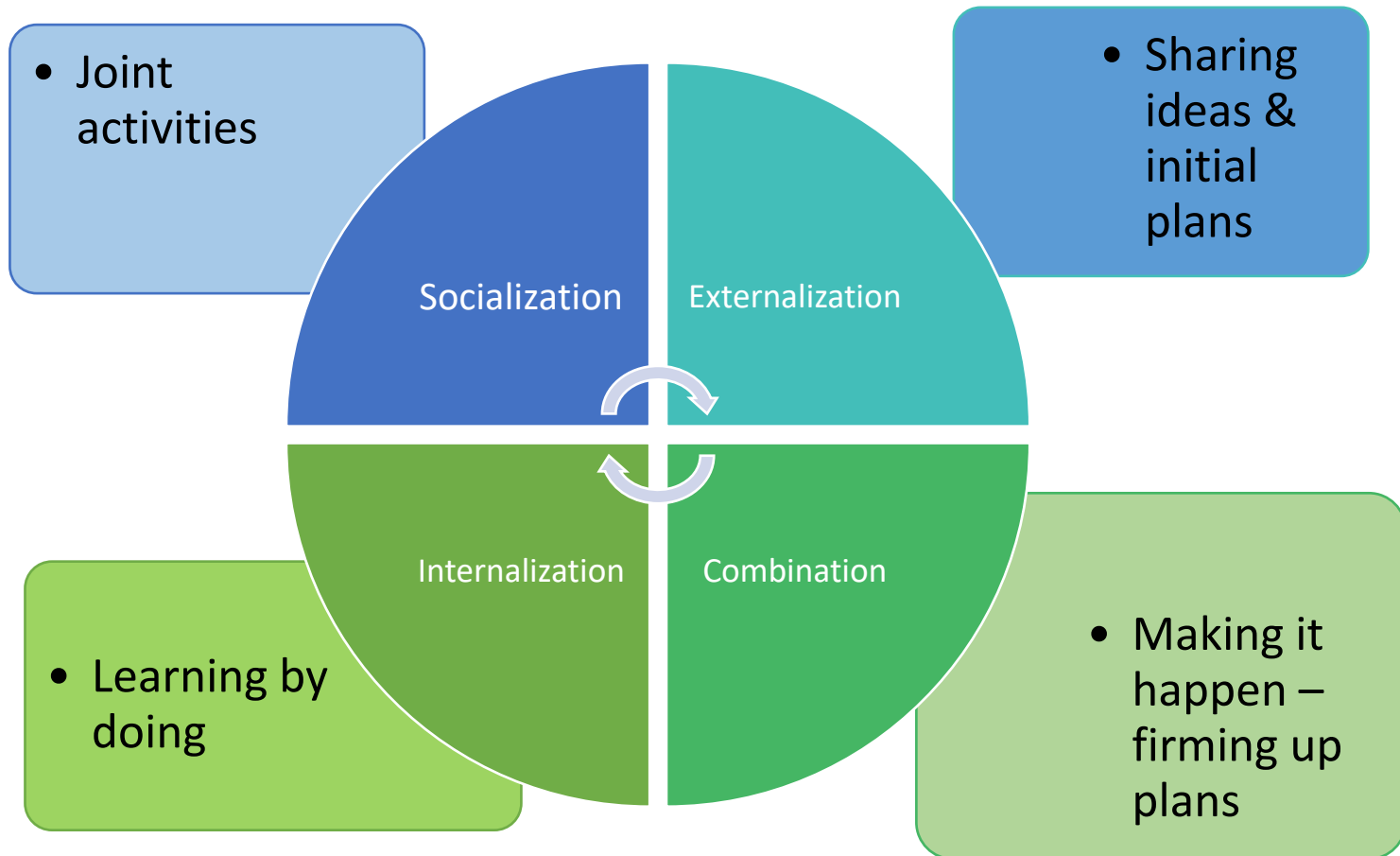
- 'The key to knowledge creation lies in the mobilization and conversion of tacit knowledge...'
- tacit knowledge = personal, context-specific and may be difficult to articulate
- '... action research presents opportunities for both academics and practitioners to add to their tacit knowledge bases through implementation and subsequent modification of academic theories'

[Rynes et al., \(2001, p.348\)](#)



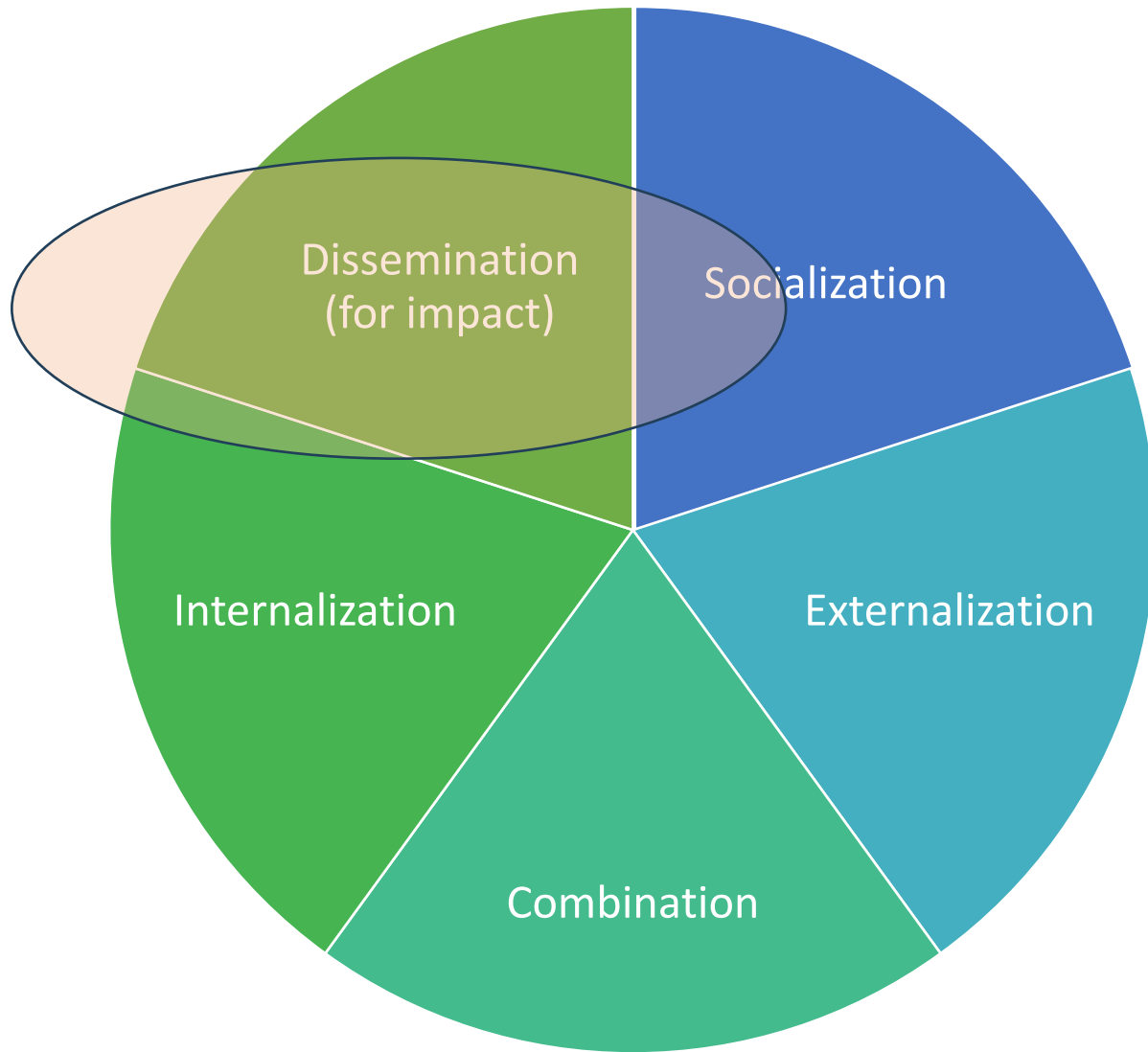
<https://www.educationnext.org/connecting-to-practice-put-education-research-to-work/>

Knowledge co-creation between research and practice



Rynes, S. L., Bartunek, J. M., & Daft, R. L. (2001). Across the great divide: Knowledge creation and transfer between practitioners and academics. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(2), 340-355.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3069460.pdf>



Example 1: 'I am' Digital Stories for supporting transitions

"'I am...' Digital Stories are short videos designed to provide a holistic, strengths-based representation of the child through enabling them to contribute their perspectives to transition planning".

(Wood-Downie et al., 2021, p.62)



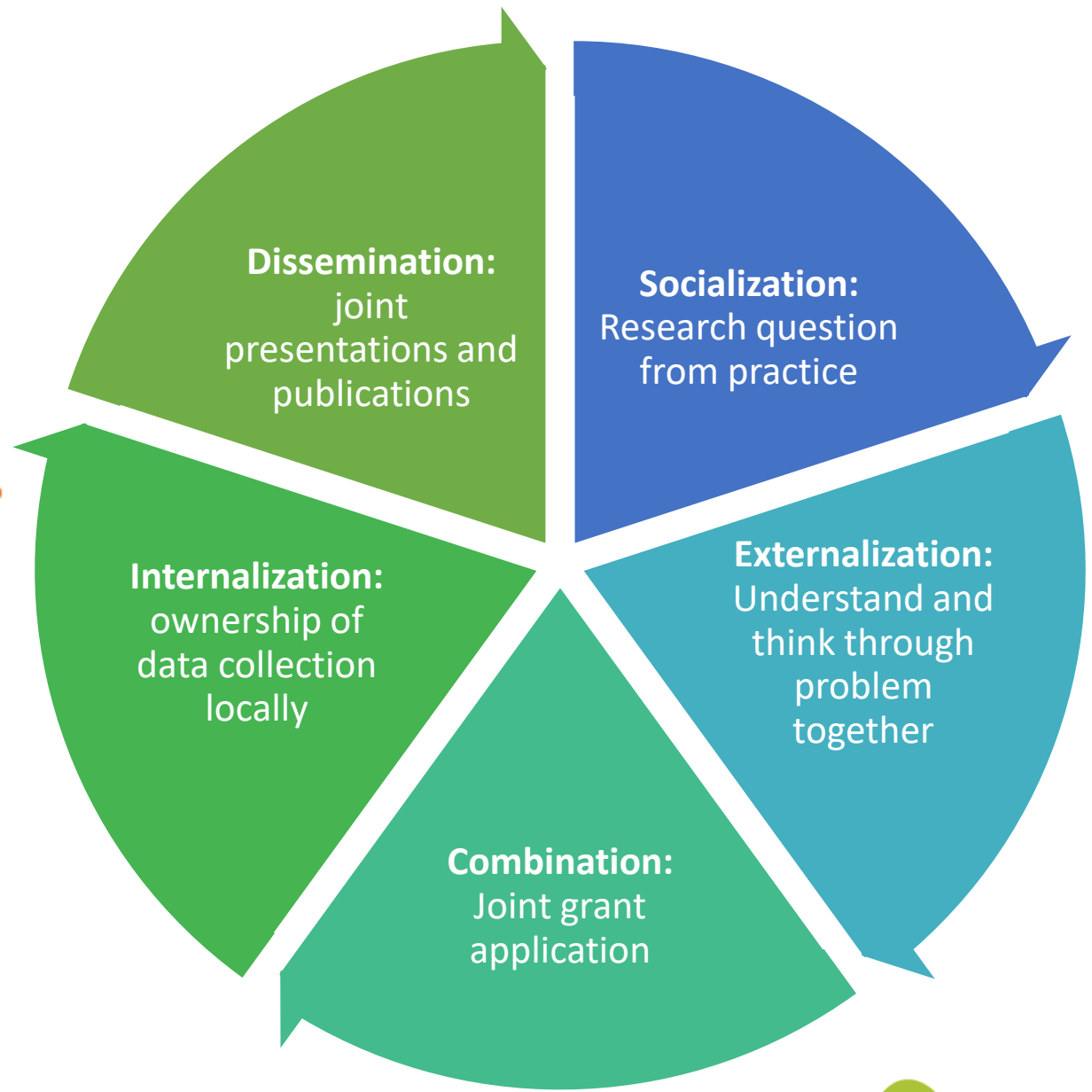
Parsons et al., (2021)

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1476718X20951235>

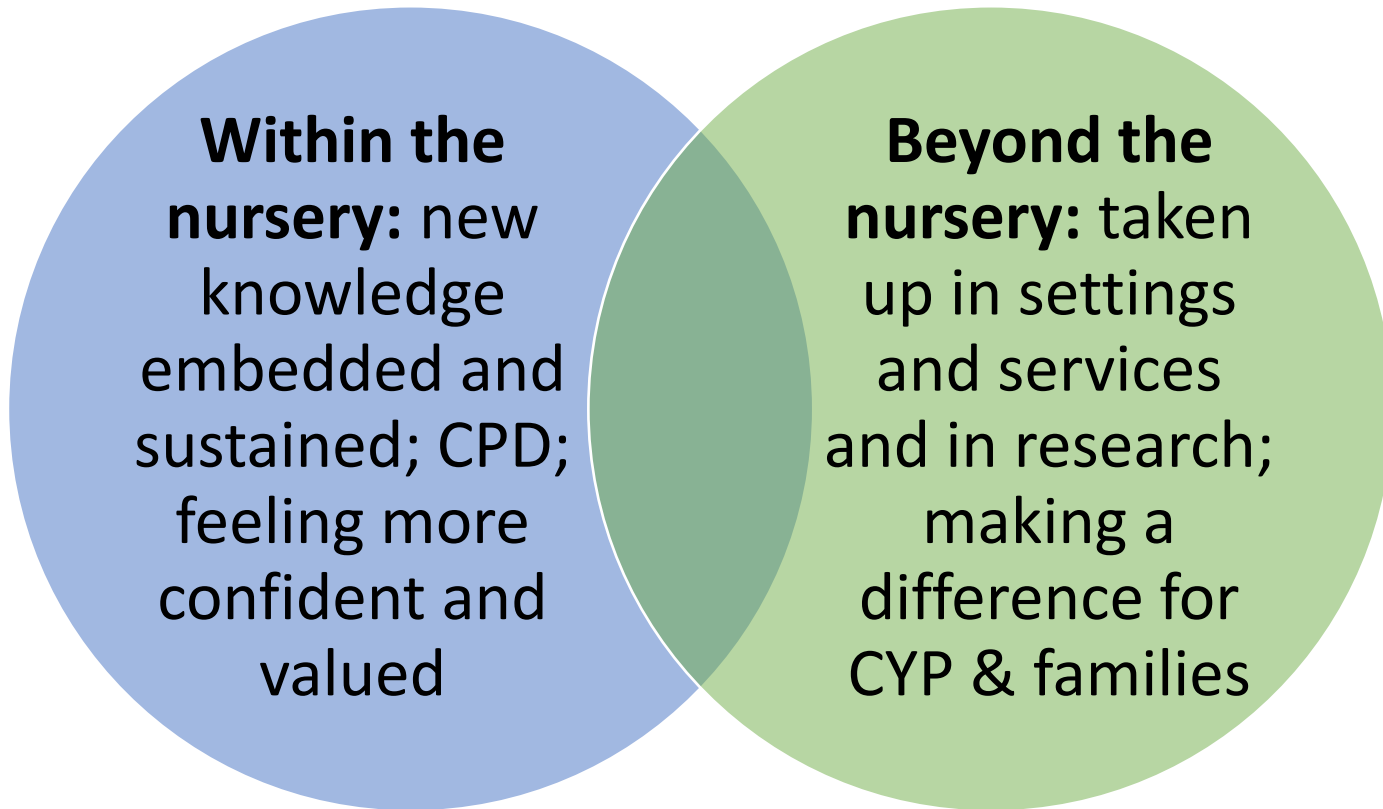
'I am' Digital Stories knowledge creation



Kathryn Ivil



Dissemination and transformative impacts on practice (& research)



Example 2: autistic young people as the researchers: co-designing an implementation team

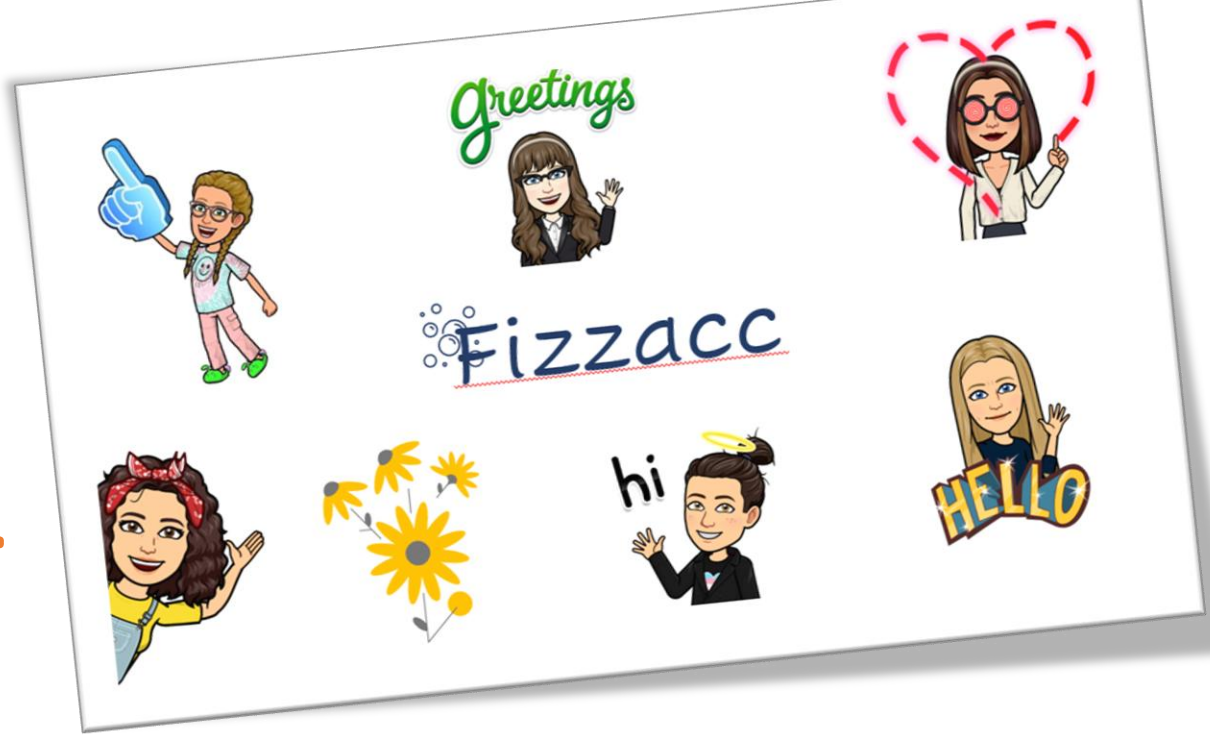


Laura Salmon, DEdPsych

- Participatory research with children and adolescents typically only involves the early stages of resource or intervention development (i.e., ideating, creating, and refining)
- Laura's study encompassed the latter stages (implementation, evaluation, and sharing), adding a unique contribution to the knowledge base

Co-created resources for promoting awareness and discussion of autistic girls' experiences at secondary school

Dr Chloe East, ESRC-funded PhD student



East, 2024



Economic and Social Research Council

What you need to know about Autistic Girls in Schools

UNIVERSITY OF Southampton

POSITIVE STORY

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCES
This story does not fit with the rest of Maggie's timeline, but we felt it was important to include it. It is so important to consider and learn from more challenging experiences. We have not written an alternative perspective as in this case both Maggie and her teachers have a clear understanding of her needs.

MAGGIE'S VIEW
In my room in Maggie and I sat in a special school because of the fact I got in year 11. I was not a good student and I got a lot of things that other children get but I have a headache, and I don't like to go to school because before the holidays my head hurts and my legs get very sore. I have been understanding my needs and they help me get my own and I've made up all my own and I'm going to make my own things now and I'm not going to school any more.

QUESTIONS
1. In this story Maggie attends a special school. How could the support strategies that Maggie refers to work in a mainstream setting?
2. Choose three ideas from this story that you think are key to Maggie's positive attitude to school.
3. If you were to add an alternative perspective for this story, what might it say?

Fizzacc

For more information, please visit <https://www.acorns-soton.org.uk/fizzacc>

Who are FIZZACC?

We are a research group consisting of one PhD student from the University of Southampton who has 20 years experience of teaching in secondary schools, and six autistic girls who have a lifetime experience of autism. We believe that learning from the lived experience of autistic people themselves is the key to developing good practice. We have been working together on ideas to help others and other pupils better understand the experiences of autistic girls in schools as part of a project on improving educational transitions. If you would like to find out more about us and what we've been doing please go to <https://acorns-soton.org.uk/2022/03/fizzacc-information/>

What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity recognises that human brains are all different. The term neurodivergent refers to people with neurodivergent brains and characteristics related to a number of conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia. People who are not neurodivergent are often referred to as neurotypical. People with neurodivergent brains add diversity which is important. Although neurodivergent brains are often caused by genetic factors, they are also designed for neurodivergent people. There are also many strengths associated with neurodivergence.

What is autism as a spectrum?

This is true for autistic people as well as neurotypical. Because autism is a spectrum, each person will have a different pattern of strengths and challenges. It is also important to remember that a person's profile will change over time. For this reason the terms 'high' and 'low' functioning people often lack the support they need to take full advantage of their strengths and opportunities due to a false

Why are we focusing on autistic girls?

The perception that many people have about autism is that it is a condition associated with boys and men. This is partly based on an outdated assumption that male and female brains are different. As a result, research and diagnostic methods have focused on boys, resulting in girls and women being identified as autistic much later if at all. So why is autism not identified in girls? There are some differences in the way autistic traits look between boys and girls.

- Girls are better at hiding their autistic traits. This is often called masking or camouflaging.
- They are more likely to want to make friends and fit in. This can often lead to them copying the behaviour of their friends.
- Girls will internalise their feelings whereas boys will often 'act out'.
- Girls have interests that are considered more typical of their age for example TV shows, pop bands or animals.

Autistic strengths

- Attention to detail
- Ability to focus
- Creativity
- Acceptance of difference
- Integrity and honesty
- Ability to identify patterns in information
- In-depth knowledge of specific interests

SC.DTP

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ESRC ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



<https://acorns-soton.org.uk/fizzacc.html>

“Team Autism”: use and evaluation of Fizzacc materials



Salmon, L., Kovshoff, H. & Parsons, S. (2025). A participatory study exploring the implementation of materials aimed at raising awareness of autistic girls' experiences in mainstream secondary schools. Paper presented at the *46th Annual Conference of the International School Psychology Association (ISPA) 16-19 July 2025*

Change attitudes

Acknowledge autism → autism = positive
(e.g. 'not being lazy')



'superpower' no stereotypes



'normal person'

① OUR VISION

~PLAN~

NOT 'Only School'
I hope so



Change (school) systems

Develop knowledge and skills



understanding masking and meltdowns

Clear communication about transition → helpers

flexibility around transitions

everyone is different

understanding equality ongoing



Supportive technology

Autism day

Cultural & gender awareness

teachers understanding needs
↓ processing time
↓ diagnosis
↓ noise levels
↓ handwriting



Benefit young people



feel safe



feel proud

voice spelling

Change what people do



not offensive language
treat people how they would like to be treated



teacher vigilance

access to sensory room

not questioning support




not an outcast
feel included

Change attitudes 

stories

poster

video in assembly
questionnaire (tutor)


Develop knowledge and skills 

poster stories

masking poster

questionnaire (tutor)

video in assembly

Change what people do 

stories

② OUR VISION 
~ DO ~

Change school systems 

charter
stories elect 'AA's (autistic allies)

Autism 'young voices' celebrate Autism the power
Day (every year)

Benefit young people



ALL
~~~~~  
~~~~~  
~~~~~

## I'VE ALWAYS BEEN GOOD AT WRITING ABOUT DISASTERS AND DEATH.

### MAGGIE'S VIEW (1)

I thought I got a 5 in my English mock. That was my overall grade for the paper. Everyone else in the class got 7s or 8s so in comparison my grade looked really bad. I was confident they would move me down a set. It wasn't until parents evening a couple of days later that they told me the breakdown of how I did in each section. I know why I did badly on the reading section - half of it was an emotion question and having stared at it for over 10 minutes I left it blank. It meant that I spent a lot more time on the creative writing section. If I was going to lose marks for not answering the question on the reading section I might as well use the time productively. On the creative writing section alone I would have got a 9. The writing prompt was for natural disasters, and we were given a picture of a train on a rainy day for a stimulus. I am really good at writing about disasters and death!

I used to get into a lot of trouble in my lessons, including a few times which my mum didn't know about. It was never made official because it wasn't really big things, but I used to get into trouble for things like complaining that the lights were too bright. I remember once, I didn't want to work with someone in the class who I didn't like, so they said I would have a week's worth of detentions. The only reason I didn't get them was that a teacher who knew me quite well was walking past the room at the time and stopped it. If he had been walking past 30 seconds later, I would have been in so much trouble. I would get into trouble for not answering questions quickly enough because I didn't have time to process the questions let alone answer them.

Mum said that it was important for me to tell my teachers in advance about my autism diagnosis and how it affected me in my lessons. Even though the school had copies of my diagnosis they



## UNTHOUGHTFUL THURSDAY

### MAGGIE'S VIEW

It was the beginning of the day during tutor time. Once a week we have 'thoughtful Thursday'. It is an extra tutor time where we learn about things like human rights and mental health. This week was World Autism Day so that was the topic for the week.

Our tutor put on a video about the impact of sensory overload. Nobody was paying attention apart from me and my friends. They were interested because they knew I had just been diagnosed as autistic. The rest of the class were shouting, laughing and making a racket. The loudest they had ever been. Our teacher, Miss Badger, did nothing.

I realised that I was shaking and that I was crying without making any noise. My best friend noticed me covering my ears and crying so she got Miss Badger who told me to leave the classroom and calm down. As I walked out into the corridor, I could hear that people in my tutor were laughing at me because I was crying at the noise.

I leaned my back against the wall and slid down, so I was half sitting and half crouching on the floor. After a little while Mrs Hughes walked past. She took me into a quieter classroom next door to calm down.

That was my first experience of having a meltdown. It was not as bad as the one I had a couple of weeks later.

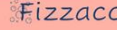
This time I was in English. It was the end of period 4, before lunch. Again everyone in the class was being as loud as they could, and it was really overwhelming. I started shaking and crying again. Mrs Simms didn't notice until I started hyperventilating. Again I was sent alone, out of the class, and into the corridor. Mrs Simms told me to try to calm down, but I was panicking and on my own, so it started to get worse and worse. About 10 minutes later one of the LSA's came. She knelt down with me, but I started to cry even more. She said, "Calm down, tell me what's wrong", I couldn't get any words out and started to sob louder and louder. I was finding it hard to breathe properly.

As I was sobbing and hyperventilating in the corridor the bell to lunch went and the corridor was suddenly packed full of people leaving their lessons. The people from my class started to leave, laughing at me as they passed. The LSA took me to the Hub because I wasn't getting any better in the corridor. It was quieter there and there was a sofa to sit on. I still couldn't stop crying though so she gave me a notebook to write down what had happened because I couldn't speak.

I asked the LSA to walk me down to my grandad who was picking me up so they could explain what had happened. I still couldn't speak without crying. When I got home my parents tried to joke with me to cheer me up and make me feel better. My throat was sore from all the crying and my voice wasn't better until the next day when it had healed.



For more information, you are welcome to visit <https://acorns-soton.org.uk/> or [info@acorns-soton.org.uk](mailto:info@acorns-soton.org.uk)



## True or False Questionnaire

Circle to say which of these statements are true and which are false.



|                                                                                                                     |      |       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------|
| Qu 1. All autistic people avoid eye contact.                                                                        | True | False |
| Qu 2. All autistic people are really good at Maths.                                                                 | True | False |
| Qu 3. Masking means hiding your traits.                                                                             | True | False |
| Qu 4. Some autistic people like bright lights.                                                                      | True | False |
| Qu 5. Being neurodivergent means that your brain doesn't work well as the brain of a neurotypical person.           | True | False |
| Qu 6. A meltdown happens when someone doesn't want to do their work in class.                                       | True | False |
| Qu 7. Boys are more likely to have an autism diagnosis than girls.                                                  | True | False |
| Qu 8. If your friend has shut down the best thing to do is try to cheer them up by telling them jokes.              | True | False |
| Qu 9. The autism spectrum means that some people are very autistic, and some people are only a little bit autistic. | True | False |
| Qu 10. Being autistic means you are better at some things than non-autistic people.                                 | True | False |



## 'MASKING' ARTWORK COMPETITION

Create a piece of artwork to portray the experience of masking (hiding one's true self).

You can use any techniques/tools/resources you wish to!

Deadline:

Monday 3rd March



The winner will receive 5 achievement points, a certificate, and some sweet treats.





| Tutor session 1                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Tutor session 2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Tutor session 3                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Tutor session 4                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Introductory presentation and FIZZACC video</p>  <p>Masking artwork competition</p>  | <p>True and false questionnaire</p>  <p>Having watched the FIZZACC video, please complete the questionnaire and then discuss the answers as a tutor group.</p> | <p>Story narrative and questions</p>  <p>Please choose one of the story narratives to read as a tutor group and then discuss the questions at the end.</p> | <p>'Autism Charter' ideas</p>  <p>Please collate your ideas for the Autism Charter. We will then read through these statements and choose between 5 and 10 to include.</p> |

# Comments from students

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"I used to think sharing your idea was like pointless, cos they'll like ignore it, but then you started taking actual my points of view, and ideas and that made me think more like I can tell" (Darzel).

"The best bits were meeting new people and learning the perspectives of them because it made me feel like I could branch out more" (Berry)

"And a lot more people have begun questioning others less when, for example, they need like headphones or they need like, a computer. Barely anyone's been questioning that kind of stuff recently."  
(Berry)

"I think, every year we move up and once X leaves, one teacher joins a new teacher and then whilst we leave, new teachers can join and take over the project" (Darzel)

## **Parent feedback:**

*"I just wanted to say X has benefited so much from this project. His confidence has grown, and his learning attitude is so much better. I know he will miss his sessions, but he now has tools under his belt to support him and his peers. X was a child who I never thought would join countless after school clubs, yet he has. I look forward to reading your final report. As an educator myself reading about projects which promote inclusion and equality are vital."*

# Impact?

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Big impact on the young people participating



Some impact on teaching staff and other pupils



Longer term impact remains to be seen...



Limited teacher involvement and ownership of the process and outcomes within school (too busy)



Pupil doubts about whether and how initiative would be sustained

# Strengths and benefits

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- Deeply embedded insights into practice and ability to make changes in a way that more extractive or external research would not be able to do
- A genuine sharing (synthesis) of expertise that produced something greater than the sum of its parts
- A major benefit of us being included as the academic partner is the wider reflection, validation, CPD and dissemination that has been achieved
- Wider impacts on practice (and research) beyond the initial research site / context

# Challenges and opportunities

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- It's always going to take time!
- Buy-in and impetus has to come from the school
- Second example shows where limitations can lie when this is not the case
- What difference might it have made if teaching staff had been more involved?
- How could you take an idea like this forward in your school to get children and young people more involved and use their involvement to inform practice?

# Reflections and conclusions

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- Close to practice research is vital for informing and developing practice in ways that align with school priorities and contexts
- HOW that is achieved and by / with whom can vary (and that's OK)
- Examples share similarities about addressing recognised needs and questions that come from practice
- Interested practitioners who facilitated initial thinking and activities
- Main difference in outcomes (so far) rests with *ownership of changes* to awareness and practice by the school / setting

# Thank you for listening 😊!

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## [ACoRNS publications](#)

ACoRNS info and resources:

<https://acorns-soton.org.uk/>

<https://iamdigitalstories.co.uk/>

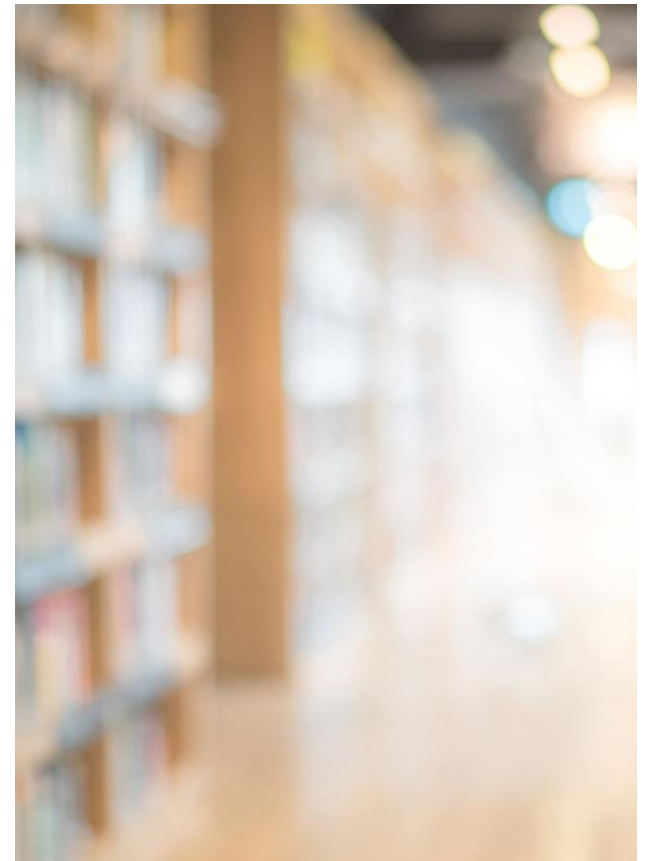
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LinkedIn:

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/acorns-the-autism-community-research-network-southampton>

Bluesky:

@acornsoton.bsky.social



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