





# 'I am' Digital Stories for enabling the voices of autistic children and young people to contribute to educational decision-making and improve educational experiences

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## ABSTRACT

Educational and social experiences and outcomes remain poor for autistic children in Western educational systems. Transitions between stages of schooling and beyond mandatory education are times of particular challenge. Traditionally, to address these difficulties, there has been a tendency to focus on the difficulties experienced by young people rather than their strengths and interests, leading to deficit-focused approaches to thinking and support. To disrupt this status quo, we co-produced a strengths-based, transition-support approach with children, families and educators to encourage a positive change in attitudes, awareness, and practices amongst those who support children's transitions. 'I am' Digital Stories draw upon the creative, arts-based method of digital storytelling to enable children and young people to contribute their voices to transitions and educational decision-making. Here we report on why this methodology is needed, what it entails, and provide an example of how it has been embedded in the practice of an Educational Psychology team within a local authority in Wales, UK, with impactful outcomes. This example shows how it is possible to make changes within local service provision that makes a difference to children and families and has wider implications for any service that supports autistic children and young people.

## Social impact

The prevalence of autism has increased markedly in recent years [1], with reports of educational systems in Western contexts struggling to meet the increased levels of need [e.g. 2]. This adds to longstanding challenges in the transitions and trajectories of autistic children for whom social, educational, and employment outcomes remain poor [3]. Autistic children report high levels of unhappiness with school [4] and are overrepresented amongst those who struggle with school attendance and experience 'school distress' [5]. Transitions between and beyond stages of schooling, as well as everyday transitions that enable children to flourish in school, are known to be particularly challenging for many autistic children [e.g. 6]. Traditionally, a medical-model approach has been taken to addressing these challenges, which has meant focusing on

children's difficulties and locating these as being 'within the child'. The neurodiversity paradigm, drawing on the social model of disability, has challenged this and encouraged a reframing of autism that focuses on the voices, strengths and interests of autistic people and how these can be effectively utilised to enable better engagement, participation and learning. However, little progress has been made in research and practice in developing methods that support autistic children and young people to share their views [7].

Consequently, there are strong calls from the autism and research communities to develop more participatory research methods that are inclusive of autistic people such that their needs and strengths can be explored and understood in more effective ways that make a difference to everyday life [8]. We (the University-based authors) co-lead the Autism Community Research Network @Southampton [ACoRNS] which

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is a research-practice partnership that aims to improve the lives of autistic children and young people within education through addressing the marginalisation and underrepresentation of their views and experiences by co-constructing the evidence base with practice [9]. Accordingly, this paper is co-authored by academic researchers and community partners.

Our ‘I am’ Digital Stories methodology was co-constructed between research and practice and is an accessible and inclusive methodology that supports the sharing of views and experiences of those who are often excluded from doing so, in visual, video form. It is a strengths-based approach, designed to actively challenge the ‘deficit drenched’ narratives [10, p.1072] that position autistic children and young people as disordered and deficient in research and practice [11]. Accordingly, our work aligns strongly with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

**Methodology**

The ‘I am’ Digital Stories methodology was informed by the arts-based, participatory approach of digital storytelling, which is designed to enable people to share their experiences and identities in inclusive ways through short videos, typically 3–5 min long [12]. There are different ways of using digital tools to tell stories and here we focus on a specific kind, inspired by the work of Lambert [13], which is about lived experiences and identity rather than creating real or fictionalised events, or focusing on literacy, pedagogy, or assessment of learning.

We adapted Lambert’s [13] workshop-based method through taking a more bespoke and individualised approach to creating Digital Stories with autistic children that involved people who knew them well (educators, families) co-creating the Stories with the child. Papers referenced in the Specifications table detail how this was achieved in different settings and with different children and young people. The ‘I am’ Digital Story framework (Fig. 1) scaffolds the creation of a Digital Story by

encouraging story creators (which could be the young person and / or those who support them) to think about their identities and experiences within educational settings and what matters to them [14,15]. The framework is informed by the Froebelian principles of early childhood which include understanding the child holistically and recognising every child’s unique skills, interests, and ways of learning [16].

An ‘I am’ Digital Story is typically structured around a series of ‘I’ statements, or similar, that highlight key strengths, interests, and capabilities of the child, interspersed with short video clips and / or illustrative photographs that show them using their skills or engaged with those interests. The emphasis is on representing strengths, rather than difficulties, since difficulties are already well covered in the written, usually formal, reports that accompany children through their education. The purpose of the ‘I’ statements is to convey, as much as possible, that the Story is being told from the child or young person’s perspective and to orient the Story viewer to the important information that is shown in the accompanying / following clip. This is Oscar’s example, which is shared with fully informed consent of his family: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkNbIPnfDCK\\_](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkNbIPnfDCK_)



The Story creation process is sequenced in four main steps: (1) Mapping (2) Describing (3) Filming and (4) Editing. More information including freely available tools and guidance is available at: <https://ia>

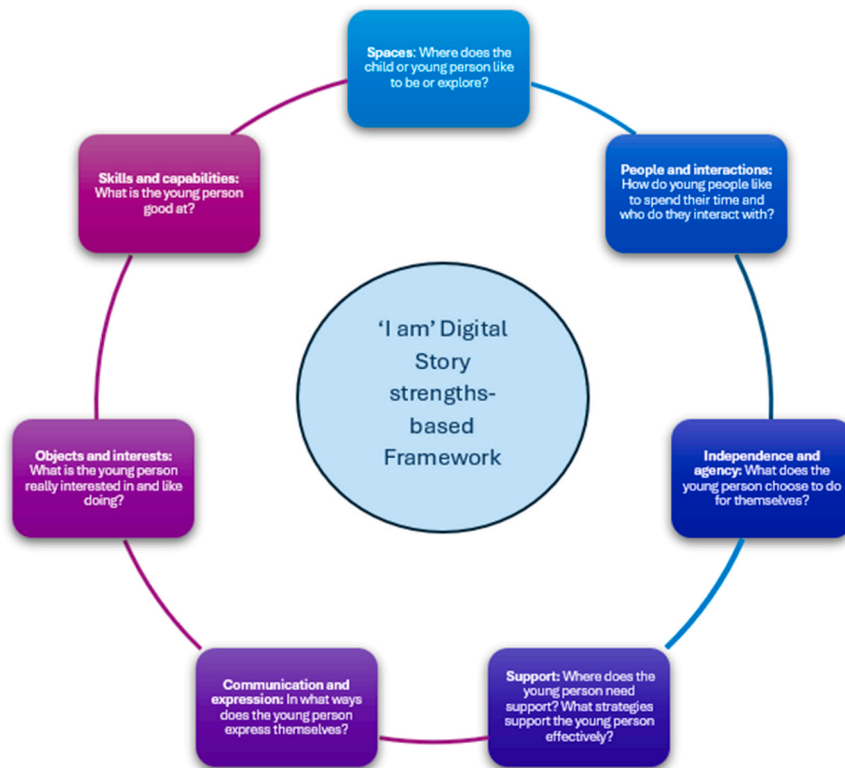


Fig. 1. ‘I am’ Digital Story framework.

[digitalstories.co.uk/resources.html](https://digitalstories.co.uk/resources.html). Examples of free resources include animated videos and downloadable written guides targeted at different audiences, including for adults supporting young people (<https://youtu.be/ortRVf9GWZg>) and when young people are taking the lead in the creation of their own Story (<https://youtu.be/GkB4E8j7GZM>).

While we developed the methodology within early years settings as children prepared to move to their first school, we have since applied and extended it to include young people at different ages and stages of transition including between primary and secondary school, and into post-school services, education, and training (see Specification Table for references). Additionally, while our own work was inspired by and has sought to address support for transitions specifically, we think there could be wider applications for the methodology in supporting progress and positive identity development more generally. In the next section, we focus on how the methodology has been embedded within an Educational Psychology Service in South Wales in the UK to illustrate the ways in which it is making a difference to the experiences of children and families.

### Results and implications

We, the Neath Port Talbot (NPT) Educational Psychology Service, initially started to use 'I am' Digital Stories in our Community Early Years team to support preschool children transitioning to school following a webinar by a member of the University research team. The Assistant Educational Psychologists delivered training and made an 'I am' Digital Story for one child within a preschool setting within NPT. Eventually, the 'I am' Digital Story project expanded across the Educational Psychology Service and is being used by different provisions within NPT (Fig. 2). We have used the 'I am' Digital Stories framework in report writing to ensure pupil views are heard and valued, and in consultations with families and professionals to gather information about the child.

We were motivated to try something new because we wanted to find a way to access the child's voice during the COVID-19 pandemic, where ensuring pupils' views were heard was especially hard. In the early years, we know that children also often get overlooked due to assumptions that they are unable to give their views [14]. We thought that the 'I am' Digital Stories were an effective way to support preschool transitions into school as they showed the child's personality, thoughts, strengths, and likes. We also found the 'I am' Digital Stories to be a good way to ensure that everyone involved is being person-centered and solution-focused which fits well with the new Additional Learning Needs policy reform in Wales, where it is integral that everyone is part of the decision-making process [17].

We have found that 'I am' Digital Stories have empowered families, as they have provided hope and validation that their child has strengths, skills and likes. The Stories have offered the opportunity for parents to see things that their child does not do at home. Whenever we show a Digital Story in a meeting, there are often 'happy tears' as parents feel such pride and admiration for their child. Digital Stories often make transitions smoother as the school can understand the child's needs better, which also tends to ease parents' anxiety. When a Digital Story is shown, everyone feels more confident that the child's needs will be met. For example, schools feel empowered to meet children's needs as they know them better, professionals who have created the Stories feel they have shared all information in an accessible way, and parents generally feel that their child is progressing and that they have strengths and skills that school will be able to support them to develop. A huge benefit of Digital Stories is that they are person-centered and solution focused. We have found that when a Digital Story is used, schools and settings are more likely to reframe their language and encourage inclusion.

For the children who create their own Stories we have found that they are empowered in their decision-making process. They can decide how to create them and what they feel is important to share with others. The Stories are also culturally sensitive in being able to show the language used in the home, for example. We have found that open

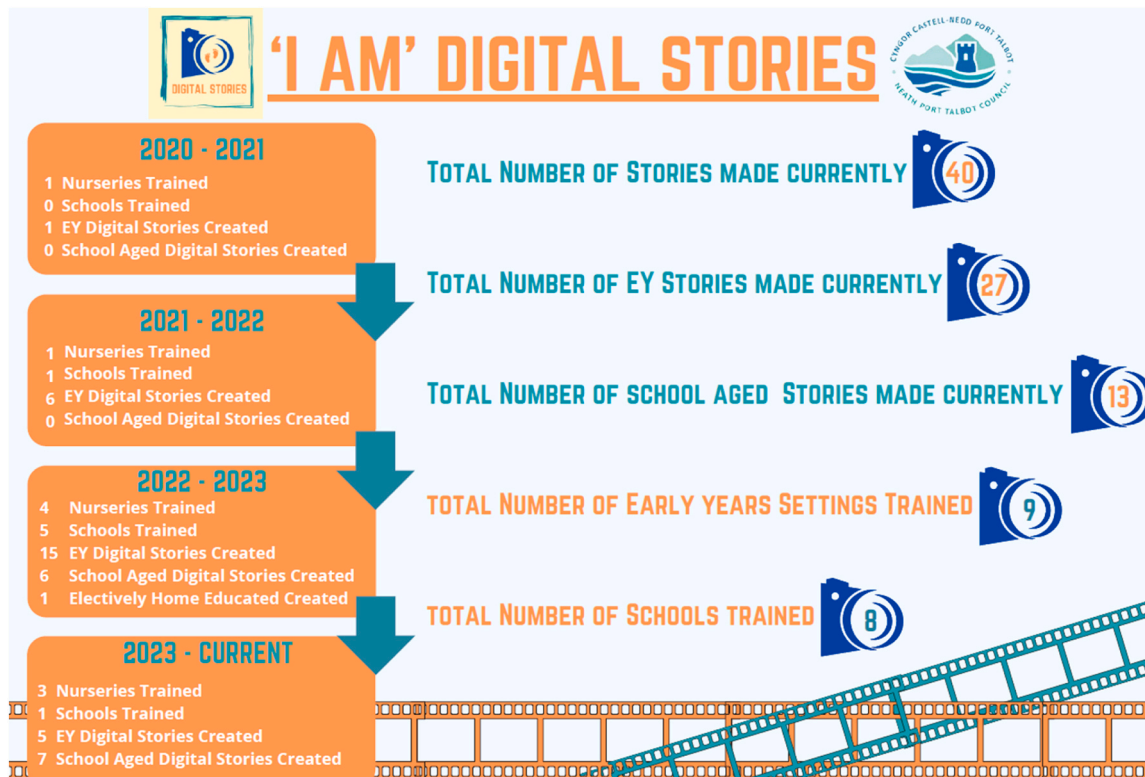


Fig. 2. Numbers of schools and settings trained and 'I am' Digital Stories made by the Neath Port Talbot Educational Psychology team (to summer 2024).

communication and psychological safety are key when a child creates their own Digital Story so that they are fully informed about where the video may be shown and how it will be used. For children who are unable to make their own Digital Stories, we see that when the Story is played, they are captivated, and they enjoy watching themselves back. Table 1 provides a summary of the benefits of applying ‘I am’ Digital

**Table 1**  
Benefits of using ‘I am’ Digital Stories in practice.

| Benefits identified by the Educational Psychology team            | Illustrative quotes or observations from feedback  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Benefits for the school to which the child is transitioning       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They have a holistic understanding of each child</li> <li>• The school can create positive support strategies before the child starts</li> <li>• The school gets to know the child’s personality</li> </ul>   | <p>“Really enjoyed, give a good understanding of the child’s likes and wishes.”<br/>                     “I had never met the child but felt as if I had after the story. I thought it gave a wealth of information about the child”.</p>   |
| Benefits for the setting staff (co-creators of the Digital Story) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They enjoy creating them as they get to see child’s progress</li> <li>• Staff use a strengths-based approach and person-centred tools</li> <li>• Staff are using more person centred, solution focused language in the way they are describing children and reframing language where they can</li> </ul>  | <p>“I felt very happy watching the digital story, knowing that the receiving school were actually able to see the child we were discussing.”</p>  |
| Benefits for the Child  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The child’s voice is heard</li> <li>• The child has an active role participating in the decision-making process</li> <li>• The children enjoy watching themselves back</li> <li>• The child is kept at the centre of decision-making</li> <li>• The child is empowered as they have a sense of ownership, choice and control over what they share about themselves</li> </ul>   | <p>From observation:<br/>                     Young child watches their video and points to it saying ‘that’s me’!<br/>                     Children have rewound and watched clips of themselves over and over. A child wanted to delete a certain photo of themselves as they were wearing a T-shirt with a character on which they perceived as ‘embarrassing’. This was clearly important to them when sharing information about themself.<br/>                     “Tears of happiness. I felt proud as it represented my child perfectly”<br/>                     “I felt happy to see how well [my child] interacted with staff and peers at his creche”<br/>                     “I watched the video it was lovely to see him enjoying playing and learning in setting. I’m looking forward to watching it again”</p> |
| Benefits for Parents/Families/Carers                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help parents build relationships with the child’s new school as they may feel that others understand their child and how to support them</li> <li>• Parents get to see their child trying new things or activities they previously thought they could not do</li> <li>• ‘I am’ Digital stories are a celebration of achievements. Parents are often used to the deficit model where professionals may focus on what their child cannot do rather than what they can do</li> <li>• The Digital Story is a helpful visual Prompt during meetings</li> </ul> |   |

Stories in practice from the different perspectives of everyone involved. In terms of the next steps, we will continue to support the creation of Digital Stories within the services and schools we support and consider carefully how we can build more capacity across the team to help with this. We hope to lead an event to share what we have done so far and raise awareness of this approach with other teams and services. Finally, it is helpful to conclude with a quote from a professional who attended our ‘I am’ Digital Stories training and is a good reminder of why making this effort is important:

I think [using] Digital Stories is the way forward as it gives you a better picture of the individual, especially communication needs but also what they like to do and focusing on the positives, rather than negatives. Win, win!

**CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Jessica Lewis:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation. **Molly McGiveron:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation. **Hanna Kovshoff:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Sarah Parsons:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Abigail Wright:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation. **Lowri Roberts:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation.

**Ethics in Publishing Statement**

I testify on behalf of all co-authors that our article submitted followed ethical principles in publishing.

Title: ‘I am’ Digital Stories for enabling the voices of autistic children and young people to contribute to educational decision-making and improve educational experiences

All authors agree that:

This research presents an accurate account of the work performed, all data presented are accurate and methodologies detailed enough to permit others to replicate the work.

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All authors have been personally and actively involved in substantive work leading to the manuscript and will hold themselves jointly and individually responsible for its content.

**Declaration of Competing Interest**

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Sarah Parsons reports financial support was provided by University of Southampton. Hanna Kovshoff reports financial support was provided by University of Southampton. Sarah Parsons reports financial support was provided by The Froebel Trust. Hanna Kovshoff reports financial support was provided by The Froebel Trust. Sarah Parsons reports

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