Eliciting rich dialogue through the use of activity-oriented interviews: Exploring self-identity in autistic young people
Abstract

The ability of children and young people to form and express their perspectives through qualitative research studies can be constrained by difficulties that they can face in typical interview situations. We describe and evaluate an interview method using concrete and engaging activities designed to enable autistic young people to surface their abilities and perspectives. Participants’ sense of self-identity was explored using traditional semi-structured interviews and novel activity-oriented interviews. The latter method provided a context within which autistic young people were better able to voice their perspectives. The efficacy of this method and considerations for its use are discussed.

Keywords: interview, qualitative, autism, self-identity, child-centred research methods
Children and young people\textsuperscript{1} are social actors (Barker and Weller, 2003), and must be understood in their own contexts. In recent years, creative research strategies have been developed for use with children and young people as participants; in fact, this field has rapidly expanded, demonstrating the need to understand them as people, and place them as central to exploring specific experiences (Christensen and James, 2008; Engel, 1999). The importance of gathering and considering the views of children and young people is not just an ideology; it reflects developments in children’s rights (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012; Woodhouse, 2004), and a shifting perspective towards viewing children as active participants rather than passive objects of research (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008). This project aimed to explore ways of giving young people a voice, thus enabling them to evidence their abilities and perspectives.

Interviewing children and young people is often viewed as challenging, perhaps premised on the assumption that they have social deficits that limit their ability to handle complex social scenarios that could inhibit rather than display their social competence. Difficulties with interviewing children operate on:

1. A communicative level: children do not simply respond as adults do if asked a question (Christensen and James, 2008), and will answer nonsensical questions

\textsuperscript{1} We use the term ‘young people’ to refer to those who are entering or in stages of adolescent development
if they are not explicitly told that they can answer with 'I don't know' (Pratt, 1990).

2. A social level: the nature of the interview situation can make power relations between children and adults particularly salient, meaning that the child can feel pressured and forced to participate (Holland et al., 2010).

3. A cognitive level: it has been argued that children cannot be effectively interviewed due to cognitive or attention deficits, making age a criterion to determine whether children will be able to respond in interview settings (Scott, 2008).

It is of vital importance that techniques which surface children's viewpoints are further developed as we can only fully learn about children's inner worlds through engaging with them. Research indicates that concrete resources (e.g. photos, toys, drawings) can assist children in interview settings (e.g. Cook and Hess, 2007; Priestley and Pipe, 1997; Wesson and Salmon, 2001), resulting in a more enjoyable experience for children (Mauthner, 1997), and deeper insights into children’s experiences and perspectives (Darbyshire et al., 2005). This suggests that researchers should find appropriate methods for engaging with children of any given age and ability to gather their views.

Lundy and McEvoy (2012) argue for the importance of child-centred research methods that engage and support children in the expression and formation of their own
perspectives. Within this context, we sought to develop an interview method that would support a participant group for whom the interview situation can impose even greater constraints on expressing themselves: young people diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum\(^2\). Preece (2002) suggests that for these individuals, there is limited intrinsic motivation to engage in social interaction, particularly with unfamiliar adults. This is often compounded by the frequent presence of language and communication difficulties in these young people (e.g. Tager-Flusberg, 1999). Furthermore, autistic young people may find it difficult to understand the motive of the researcher, particularly where an interview is purely exploratory in terms of capturing individual perspectives. Autistic young people may believe that if an interviewer is asking a question, that there is a single ‘correct’ answer that is expected, and become anxious if they cannot give this ‘right’ answer (Menzies et al., 2011).

**Exploring self-identity in autistic young people**

The aim of the current studies was to explore the self-identity of autistic young people, through the use of an activity-oriented interviewing technique designed to support the formation and expression of their perspectives. Self-identity involves an awareness of one’s own existence and uniqueness: a sense of ‘I’ (Lewis, 1990). Self-

\(^2\) In line with the current UK conception of the social model of disability framework, we will refer to young people who are diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum as 'autistic young people'.

identity also requires an awareness of the key categories to which one belongs (e.g. gender) that define one’s identity; a sense of ‘me’ as distinguishable from others (Lewis, 1990). The specific aims of the interviews were to explore:

- Young people’s self-perception and self-awareness
- If and how the young people can project themselves into the future
- Participants’ perceptions of themselves as a person diagnosed with autism
- Participants’ comparisons of themselves with others

We chose to use this context within which to explore the efficacy of activity-oriented interview methods for two reasons. First, despite evidence of self-awareness and identity construction in autobiographical accounts of autistic individuals (e.g. Hall, 2001; Williams, 1992), there is a dearth of qualitative research studies on identity and self-perception in autistic young people. This perhaps stems from the belief that the social world is not as important for these individuals, and that their difficulties with self-referential cognition might preclude a strong sense of identity from being constructed (Bagatell, 2007). Indeed, as Bagatell (2007: 414) argues, “Because, as traditional, deficit-driven views of autism emphasize, individuals with autism have difficulty with social interaction and communication, the issue of identity construction may appear to

---

3 Activity-oriented methods are defined in the context of focus group discussion by Colucci (2007) as the use of exercises and activities to supplement questioning.
be of little significance”. However, absence of evidence does not equate to evidence of absence, and it may be concluded that individuals diagnosed with autism have a limited sense of identity primarily because research methods used may have been inappropriate for surfacing the identity that these individuals do possess.

The proposed Theory of Mind deficit in autistic individuals (e.g. Hughes and Leekam, 2004), which supposedly limits insight into the mental lives of self and other, can lead to an expectation that these individuals will have difficulty communicating their own perspectives in an interview. In principle, such a deficit would prevent reflection on the self as a social ‘object’, and limit the development of a stable self-concept (Bosacki, 2000; Lee and Hobson, 1998). These conclusions are premature. The use of typical research methods can serve to reinforce deficit-driven perspectives of autism (i.e. do not have a sense of identity, cannot reflect on selves socially, do not have Theory of Mind). These conclusions are at best, limiting, and at worst, damaging. Instead, we need to consider ways in which these individuals are able to evidence their abilities rather than presenting a context that reinforces disabilities; that is, we need to reconstruct the interview environment such that it gives these individuals a voice. For example, research demonstrates that in qualitative studies with autistic young people, provision of a concrete basis for questioning and a shared point of reference between interviewer and interviewee is likely to result in a more effective communicative exchange (e.g. Barrow and Hannah, 2012).
Second, in line with the rights agenda discussed by Lundy and McEvoy (2012), this research endeavour has the potential to do more than just reconsider the identity and self-perception of autistic young people from a research perspective. It can also provide these individuals with the opportunity to engage in their own process of identity construction: “Perhaps by shifting attention from deficits to social participation, individuals with autism…may be better prepared to engage in the process of identity construction, leading to a full and meaningful life” (Bagatell, 2007: 425). This reflects Oakley’s (1994) dialogue on whether research with child participants represents an endeavour of research with children or research for children.

Thus, qualitative research with autistic young people should not be abandoned simply because it poses certain challenges. Indeed, Daniel and Billingley (2010) argue that precisely this kind of research is important in giving these participants a voice and affording them the opportunity to understand their difficulties and strengths, as well as contribute to policy decisions that would otherwise be made on their behalf without taking their views into account.

**Qualitative approaches to understanding the views of autistic young people**

The two studies reported here were conducted within the same school which catered for a range of special educational needs. Participants were selected on the
inclusion criterion of a diagnosis anywhere on the autism spectrum and possessing a statement of special educational needs. All participants were 12- to 14-years-old (mean age = 13.2). The rationale for selecting this age group was based on theories that the early adolescent period is a crucial part of identity development, where comparisons with others and the resulting implications of these comparisons are particularly salient (Damon and Hart, 1988). All participants were male, due to the higher prevalence of autism being diagnosed in males (Baron-Cohen et al., 2005) and reported gender differences in the processes underlying identity formation during adolescence (Archer, 1989). Both studies were reviewed by the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Surrey and allowed to proceed. Informed consent for each young person’s participation was sought from and granted by the School Headteacher, parents or guardians, and the young person themselves using a specially designed information sheet and consent form. All interviews were audio recorded and consisted of questions exploring four main topics: descriptions of self, descriptions of the future self, perception of the self as a person with autism, and comparisons between self and others. Details are described in turn below and summarised in Table 1.

### Materials and methods
Study 1: Standard interview techniques

Five boys (those for whom parental consent was granted) were interviewed individually in a room in their school, using conversational semi-structured interviews that aimed to explore the boys' perspectives\(^4\). Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. One interviewer (a researcher who had previously worked in the school) conducted all five interviews.

Study 2: Activity-oriented interviews

Activity-oriented questions were used to gather young people's perspectives. This methodology was adapted from that reported by Colucci (2007), who discussed it in the context of focus group discussions, as a way to assist reflection on abstract concepts and to make participation more enjoyable.

Eight boys (those for whom parental consent was granted) were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule that incorporated a series of activities. The interviews were carried out individually in a room in the school, by a second researcher who had also worked at the school previously. Each interview lasted between 25 and 30 minutes.

\(^4\) Where children needed probing to develop their responses, verbal prompts were available for use in the standard interviews, but proved largely ineffective. In the activity-oriented interviews, prompts involved redirecting children to the concrete focus of the activity, but these were rarely required.
Eliciting rich dialogue

Each interview explored issues of self-identity through discussion of concrete materials prepared by participants in their art classes two weeks prior to the interviews. The drawing tasks (see Table 1) were framed as typical art activities, and were facilitated by the child’s usual teacher. In the interviews, the young person was given a small mirror and asked to describe how he felt, what he saw, and what he thought other people would see (Reddy et al., 2010). In addition, the young person was asked to talk about the artwork they had produced (see Table 1), and to consider how the perspectives expressed through their artwork might differ to another person’s perspectives.

Analysis

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) for several reasons. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis is a flexible method that is applicable to many types of qualitative data, and as different types of data were elicited, flexibility was key. Many authors argue that thematic analysis assumes the researchers have a sense of what they are looking for while also allowing for ‘bottom-up’ research (Crawford et al., 2008). Because the research had central topics it was aiming to explore (see Table 1), thematic analysis allowed these to be considered in addition to other emerging themes. Furthermore, thematic analysis
encourages the process of attempting to access similarities and differences in participant experiences (Breakwell, 2006).

To conduct the analysis, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. After reading through the transcript several times, it was searched for specific instances where the young person's perspectives were communicated. All transcripts were considered in light of all themes, which enabled the comparison discussed below.

The young people's responses to questions within each method of interview were considered and a total of four themes emerged; although broadly stated below, the quality of the responses varied widely, with the activity-oriented interviews providing considerably more information with improved quality. The themes emerging from both sets of interviews will be discussed below to illustrate how the boys responded in activity-oriented interviews as opposed to traditional interviews; however, this will be brief to ensure that the paper's focus remains on the usage of the strategy in future research.

Comparative Analysis

Theme 1: Self-perception and self-awareness
This theme considers the way that the boys illustrated their self-perception and self-awareness, in terms of their expression of a sense of self, an understanding of personal characteristics, and accessing the content of their inner life through dialogue.

Boys in the traditional interviews found it difficult to describe themselves when asked. They did not provide much information about their internal world nor much awareness of their personality traits:

*Funny...sometimes kind, happy most of the time* (Mark)

Mark was the only participant who gave this much detail. The others were considerably more vague in their answers or did not stay on topic and started speaking about others. The other common response was to rely on concrete physical characteristics:

*I got a red jumper and I got black trousers and I've got bushy standing up brown hair...* (Edward)

Here, Edward gave a description of his clothing and features that others could see. This illustrates that the responses elicited about self description in the traditional interview setting were based on tangible thinking rather than personality characteristics, possibly due to personality being a more abstract concept and thus more challenging to articulate.
In the activity-oriented interviews, participants were asked to describe themselves whilst undertaking two activities: describing themselves whilst looking in a mirror; and describing the picture they had drawn of themselves in their art class (see Figure 1).

As in the traditional interviews, participants examined their physical characteristics. However they also gave more detailed responses and illustrated an awareness of themselves not demonstrated in the standard interview. For example:

*Someone evil and nasty. Because I’m always mean to people. I always shout...* (Theo)

In this case, Theo described a negative personality trait and then qualifies this with evidence from his behaviour. The descriptions of the self were more abstract than seen in the standard interviews, going beyond describing purely physical characteristics, and showing an awareness of the enduring nature of their own psychological characteristics.
In sum, the standard interview participants were unable to provide details about themselves, particularly those of an abstract nature. However, when the interview was activity-oriented, the boys were provided with the opportunity to consider aspects of their selves in more depth (see Table 2).

**Theme 2: Description of the future self**

This theme emerged as a result of considering whether participants were able to project out of the present and describe how they saw themselves in the future. They were asked to explain what they would like to do for a job and what type of life they saw for themselves when they were older.

In the conventional interviews, the boys found this immensely difficult. Only two of the five provided any response. In each case the answers were brief and lacked detail. For example:

*My future plan is to have a flat and a cat.* (Edward)

During the activity-oriented interviews, questions were asked whilst children had the picture of themselves as they wish to be when they grow up as a concrete stimulus
in front of them (see Figure 2). As a result, vivid and interesting dialogue emerged, giving the impression that the young person could project out of the present and create a rich picture of their future. For example:

...I want to be an actor because I really like drama... because I like playing different characters in plays...I think it's fun and I like it because you get to perform it to people. I like people watching me... (Christopher)

As can be seen here, Christopher has an understanding of what acting is and provides insight into why he likes it, qualifying his answer with an awareness of his perceived personal strengths. Furthermore, his response demonstrates his enjoyment of being the centre of attention and the opportunities offered to him through acting.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

This personal insight was also demonstrated by numerous other boys, including those who did not have a specific profession in mind, suggesting that not having clear plans for the future was not simply the result of an inability to project into the future. For example:
I don't know what I'm going to be when I'm older. I just let the path take its course. I'm sure I'd wanted to be something so many times of my life...

(Andrew)

This response demonstrates a personal awareness and an ability to philosophise about life goals. Using self-referential language, Andrew expresses insight into his own future by putting his trust in serendipitous events.

These responses were supported by using activities and providing the young people the opportunity to consider this in advance during art class. Boys who participated in the activity-oriented interviews provided considerably more descriptive and articulate responses about their futures than those young people who participated in the standard interviews (see Table 2). This illustrates that these young people have an understanding of and interest in their future and can articulate this given the appropriate resources.

Theme 3: Perception of self as a person with autism

This theme explored how the young person defined themselves within the context of being diagnosed with autism. They were asked to describe what autism was and how it influenced them.
The group of boys who answered questions in the traditional interview struggled to explain autism and how it applied to them. They found it challenging to associate the disorder with themselves and showed limited awareness of its effect. For instance:

[Autism means]… a person with trouble speaking. (Ben)

…[autistic people] do have a good brain but they don't know how to control it. (Edward)

In both cases, participants do not acknowledge themselves as experiencing autism nor state ways in which they have difficulty; instead, they chose to explain autism as being about a wider set of people. It seems that they are not using themselves as a reference point, instead explaining an abstract concept.

The activity-oriented interviews, on the other hand, provided participants with the opportunity to speak in more depth about their experiences. The boys looked at the picture of their class that they had created and were asked why they were at the school. This led to the boys expressing somewhat higher levels of self-awareness:

---

5 To protect the anonymity of participants, a picture of this activity is not included here.
Because I have Aspergers and I find things difficult... I find it hard to make friends... (Christopher)

In this example, Christopher has a clear understanding of his difficulties and provides examples of how this works in practice. He is clearly able to explain his difficulties, including why he is in his class at school. Participants in the activity-oriented interviews also made use of self-referential language when discussing autism; responses to questions in the standard interviews used the third person when discussing autism, with no use of first person pronouns.

In the context of the activity-oriented interviews, participants were also able to make comparisons between themselves and others in their class, demonstrating a comparative understanding of the other members of the class and a shared identity:

...we are all the same level as each other. It would be really odd to have a class who's like really low level with a high level in the same class... (Brian)

Brian and several others mentioned that they were at similar levels to their classmates and that this encourages their understanding of the others around them. The concrete focus of the questioning supported participation and enabled the boys to explain themselves in more depth (see Table 2).
Theme 4: Comparison of self to others

The most remarkable differences in boys’ responses occurred when considering themselves as compared to others around them. The interview questions asked the young people to share ways that they were similar and different to those around them. This was done by asking the young people to consider specific individuals, such as siblings and those in their class at school.

The young people in the traditional interview group struggled to articulate the differences between themselves and others around them:

Edward: ...I do have friends local who don't go to this school.
Interviewer: ...Are you similar to them?
Edward: ...I think I am...
Interviewer: ...Why do you think you are?
Edward: Or I could be a little different. No, no wait I'm a little different...I am but I have no idea of it.
In this dialogue, Edward demonstrates difficulty in articulating how he is different. Of particular note is his difficulty expressing the similarities or differences by saying 'I have no idea of it.'

The focus during this part of the activity-oriented interview was on each picture participants had produced of their favourite things (see Figure 3). The self-portraits were also used to encourage participants to think about whether other people would draw them in the same way. The activity-oriented interviews elicited richer text and more in-depth understanding through the boys’ increased ability to express themselves. Furthermore, explanations were of better quality and participants expressed a particularly insightful understanding of themselves and those around them. In particular, the participants in these interviews had:

- Different visual perceptions from others: I don't think other people would draw me the way I drew myself...different ways of drawing my features and a different way of seeing me. (Christopher)

- Explanations for why a person is a friend: Because [friend] is funny, we have similar interests, we just really get along. (Brian)
• Awareness of the differing needs of others: [the class is] *sort of a mixture of people - different difficulties, different personalities.* (Peter)

• An ability to articulate similarities and differences between self and others:

  *Very, very, very different [from my brother]. Our heights, our age, personality, what we like and dislike, what we do, everything really.* (Matt)

In each of these examples, additional information is gathered when using the activity-oriented interviews and participants used themselves as the reference point when making comparisons. Not only is the information more detailed, a lot more information is collected providing a more comprehensive representation of how these boys consider themselves in relation to those around them (see Table 2).

**INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE**

**Discussion**

*The value of using activity-oriented interviews*

As illustrated in the themes above, through the use of activity-oriented interviews young people were able to articulate themselves better, use themselves as a
reference point for others, and illustrate that they have perspectives that can, and should, be voiced. Even though children and young people as a group are often dismissed, those with developmental disorders are even more likely to go unheard (Begley, 2000; Davis et al., 2008). Using activity-oriented techniques, such groups may be given the opportunity to engage more fully in presenting their views and experiences.

In evaluating the efficacy of activity-oriented interviews, we follow the lead of Darbyshire et al. (2005), who, when utilising multiple methods of gaining data from children, reflected on whether the use of these methods resulted in more insight into the topic of interest, or just produced more data. It is clear that in the present study, the use of activity-oriented interviews resulted in a greater amount of dialogue from participants than standard interviews. This is important in itself; for a participant group commonly described as ‘hard to reach’ (Curtis et al., 2004), facilitating dialogue and self-expression is a valued outcome. However, in order for the novel method to be truly efficacious, it should afford insights into the perceptions and experiences of participants not gained through traditional techniques. In the current context, the most appropriate way to assess this is to consider the conclusions we would draw about the sense of self-identity and self-awareness in autistic young people on the basis of each type of interview. Would these conclusions differ according to the method used?

First, there are many reports in the literature that autistic individuals do not have a strong sense of identity (e.g. Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). The dialogue obtained from
the standard interviews is compatible with this assumption; participants found it difficult to describe themselves, made little use of self-referential language, and did not seem to identify themselves as an autistic young person. On the basis of the activity-oriented interviews, we might draw a very different conclusion. Here, participants demonstrated a clear awareness of the self; they made stronger use of self-referential language, noticeably identified the self as a person diagnosed with autism, and demonstrated the ability to explicitly articulate aspects of the self that are distinctive when making comparisons with others. Thus, the activity-oriented interviews were able to surface abilities not exhibited when engaged in a typical interview process.

Second, autistic individuals are commonly described as having impaired imagination, and an inability to project out of the present (e.g. Wing and Gould, 1979). Participant responses in the standard interviews are again consistent with this assumption; only two of the five boys were able to articulate any response when asked about their future plans. Even those responses that were given were brief and were not qualified with explanation. Conversely, participants in the activity-oriented interviews gave vivid descriptions of future plans, showing an ability to visualise themselves in the future, and providing clear justification for their plans making reference to personal characteristics. Again, the use of activity-oriented questioning allowed participants to surface abilities often hidden or presumed to not be present in this group.
Finally, the hypothesised Theory of Mind deficit in autism is presumed to inhibit the ability to consider others' perspectives. Again, participants in the standard interviews demonstrated difficulties in this area. They were unable to make comparisons between themselves and their classmates, and seemed mostly unaware of others' needs. Participants in the activity-oriented interviews showed some ability to perspective take; most boys differentiated their views from those of other people, expressing differences in personalities and likings. Consequently, it can be assumed that these young people do have the hypothesised Theory of Mind and can put themselves ‘in other people’s shoes’, thus being capable of understanding that another person’s perspective may differ from their own. This is in line with the conclusions of Williams (2004), who argues that the ability of an individual to understand his and other people’s perspectives constantly develops through daily interactions, thus criticising the view of ‘possessing’ (or not possessing) a Theory of Mind.

The use of standard interview techniques resulted in responses that have the potential to reinforce standard ‘deficit’ perceptions of individuals with autism. Responses illustrated difficulty with precisely the kinds of things autistic individuals are hypothesised to. However, this is just as likely to be the artefact of a limiting research methodology as it is a true reflection of young people’s abilities. Changing the nature of the interview format to activity-oriented questioning provided participants with an opportunity to challenge this deficit-oriented approach to developmental disorders. As a
result, we are able to draw a more insightful conclusion, both in terms of future research and in terms of practice, than would be possible from standard interviews. The findings from the activity-oriented interviews suggest that we should move away from a deficit model premised on categorical ‘can / cannot’ or ‘do / do not’ assumptions; instead, we should consider concepts such as self-identity and self-other awareness as continua, that can be surfaced given an appropriate context.

In terms of the advantages that facilitated these much improved results, the first factor is that participants were prepared for the interviews. By completing some tasks before the interview, perspectives could be considered before being asked directly. An additional factor that is likely to have supported the boys' responses is that the interviewer had a series of tasks to undertake within the interview setting. Instead of the typical interview in which an interviewer sits across from the interviewee and looks on as the interviewee attempts to respond, the activities provided a shared reference point, which was concrete in nature, meaning that the participants were not required to sustain eye contact. As stated earlier, research indicates that if methods are made concrete, children are more likely to engage; this seems to be true of the participants in this study. Additionally, the activity-oriented interviews extended forms of expression beyond just those which children, especially those with autism, might find challenging. The use of pictures, mirror behaviour, photographs, and favourite things all encourage autistic
Eliciting rich dialogue

individuals to understand themselves in ways which they might not have considered previously.

Potential issues with the application of activity-oriented interviews

It is important to note that in both studies, the interviewers were previously known to the participants. Although this can be an especially helpful strategy for engaging children (Punch, 2002), it provides a limitation for any researcher who would like to implement this strategy without spending time with children prior to usage.

The use of activity-oriented interviews in this study was dependent on support from the school, by taking time out of lessons to produce some of the materials prior to the interviews. It may be that other applications of this method will require buy-in from potential collaborators, but the completion of activities prior to the interview does not have to be a defining feature of this method. Such activities could form part of the interview itself. It is also conceivable that the kind of issues that are most likely to benefit from exploration using activity-oriented interviews are also those for which time taken to prepare materials is likely to have practical, if not also therapeutic, benefit.

A further issue with this method is that it is more time-consuming than standard interviews. Regardless of whether materials are prepared ahead of time or activities are used only within the interview itself, the incorporation of practical foci can result in a more lengthy session. Researchers using this method also need to decide to what extent
the activities themselves form ‘data’. In the context of focus groups, Colucci (2007) argues that the actual content of the activities themselves is not of primary focus, rather the dialogue that their completion elicits. This was also the approach adopted here. However, there is the potential to analyse ‘activities’ themselves, for example coding drawings, providing an extra source of data if this helps to illuminate the focal research questions.

**Conclusion**

Overall this study provides an important platform under which gathering data from a hard to reach group could be achieved. It details an innovative approach in considering research techniques for gathering the views of children and young people, particularly those who have been diagnosed with autism. As well as illustrating strong potential for qualitative research with autistic young people, this methodology could be introduced to studies with typically developing children, and particular groups of adults, as an innovative strategy for both researcher and participants engaging in dialogue. It may also be beneficial to use this method in a therapeutic way when discussing sensitive topics, and to promote reflection. Previous research has demonstrated that the use of concrete resources can improve the engagement of children in interview settings (e.g. Cook and Hess, 2007). Thus, it is likely that the use of activities such as the ones we describe here would further support typically-developing children in voicing their perspectives. Even though the activity-oriented method was initially introduced in focus
groups (Colucci, 2007), this study has illustrated that it can be used effectively in one-to-one interviews, as it has been shown to be a successful method of engaging with participants. Beyond the clear research implications, the use of activity-oriented interviews could strongly support practitioners in clinical and educational settings who need or want to elicit the views and perspectives of those who may have difficulty engaging with typical interview formats.

Acknowledgements: We thank the teachers and pupils for their participation in this research. We also thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.
References


Eliciting rich dialogue


Colucci E (2007) “Focus groups can be fun”: The use of activity-oriented questions in focus group discussions. *Qualitative Health Research* 17: 1422-1433.


Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview topic</th>
<th>Semi-structured questioning by topic (in both standard and activity-oriented interviews)</th>
<th>Additional activities to support questioning in activity-oriented interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-perception and self-awareness</td>
<td>Questions about self-description - Physical characteristics - Personality</td>
<td>Self-portraits, considering perspective of self and other Looking at self in a mirror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of future self</td>
<td>Questions about future plans - Future plans/dreams - Personal strengths/Weaknesses</td>
<td>Self-portrait of self in future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of self as a person with autism</td>
<td>Questions about the term ‘autism’ and how the participant would describe autism - Describing autism - Difficulties associated with autism - Impact of autism on school/home life</td>
<td>Artwork produced by creating a collage of their class members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison of self to others</td>
<td>Questions about the similarities and differences between the participant and their friends and</td>
<td>Artwork produced by creating a collage of favourite things and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family members</td>
<td>interests of friends and family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Self in relation to classmates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Self in relation to siblings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eliciting rich dialogue
Eliciting rich dialogue

Table 2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1: Self-perception and self-awareness</th>
<th>Standard interviews</th>
<th>Activity-oriented interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty providing personal characteristic and focus on concrete physical characteristics.</td>
<td>More expressive and detailed descriptions of themselves, including abstract ideas.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2: Description of the future self</th>
<th>Standard interviews</th>
<th>Activity-oriented interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Few could respond to these questions and provided little, if any, description about their future plans.</td>
<td>Gave longer and more in-depth responses, including plans for their future.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 3: Perception of self as a person with autism</th>
<th>Standard interviews</th>
<th>Activity-oriented interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great difficulty describing autism and did not tend to apply it to themselves.</td>
<td>Able to explain autism and consider themselves as having it, expressed awareness of their experience as autistic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 4: Comparison of self to others</th>
<th>Standard interviews</th>
<th>Activity-oriented interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in comparing self to others and in describing others, often relying on concrete examples.</td>
<td>Used themselves as a reference point for comparison and described important people in their lives.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Kevin’s drawing of himself, used in the activity-oriented interview.

Figure 2. Julien’s drawing of himself as he would like to be in the future, used in the activity-oriented interview.

Figure 3. Brian’s picture of his favourite things, used in the activity-oriented interview.

Table Captions

Table 1. Summary of interview topics in standard interviews and activity-oriented interviews.

Table 2. Summary of children’s responses within each theme of the standard interviews and activity-oriented interviews.