

From Prose to Poetry: Retelling the Experiences of Children with Autism Navigating Around a
School

Julie E. N. Irish, PhD

Iowa State University

Corresponding author:

Julie E. N. Irish, PhD, Department of Interior Design, Iowa State University, 158 Bissell Road,
Ames, Iowa 50011.

E-mail: jenirish@iastate.edu

Tel. 515-294-8978

FROM PROSE TO POETRY: RETELLING THE EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN WITH
AUTISM NAVIGATING AROUND A SCHOOL TO PROMOTE EMPATHY AND
UNDERSTANDING

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to describe the experiences of four children with Autism Spectrum Disorder navigating around the corridors of an unfamiliar school and translate the findings into poetic format. Poetry could provide a more accessible format to a non-academic audience and promote empathy and understanding about this population.

Design/methodology/approach

Each participant was shown a route from the start point to the destination by the researcher then asked to lead the way there. Post-study, participants were interviewed for their perceptions and feelings about navigating.

Findings

Participants' responses and behaviors differed, e.g., some were stimulated by colors, some noticed small details, and some were distracted. Poetic translation vividly emphasized these behaviors and emotions.

Originality

Few studies have described how children with autism navigate the built environment or asked their opinion about navigating. None in the field have used poetic translation to explore data.

Keywords: poetic translation, children with autism, navigating around a school, promoting empathy, navigational aids, poetry

Introduction

As one who studies people, particularly individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and how they are affected by the designed environment, I am concerned that the research we do that illuminates the lives of the people we study may not reach those people. A non-academic is unlikely to have access to conference proceedings, journal articles, or research databases, and may be disinclined to read potentially heavy-going and time-consuming material. The purpose of this paper is to translate the experiences of children with ASD navigating an unfamiliar environment into a more accessible format that could be shared with a non-academic audience to elicit empathy and understanding about this population.

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder defined by impairments in social communication and interaction, and repetitive behaviors that restrict interest in other activities (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). A common characteristic is a hyper- or hyposensitivity to sensory stimuli in the built environment (APA, 2013; Dunn, 2008; Harrison & Hare, 2004). Another characteristic is weak central coherence, failing to see the big picture and instead focusing on small, irrelevant details (Baron-Cohen, 2008; Frith, 2003). Literature also describes how individuals with ASD have difficulty navigating the environment (Baumers & Heylighen, 2010; Paron-Wildes, 2008; Scott, 2009; Vogel, 2008).

This research is novel in several ways. Firstly, few studies have described how the environment affects children with ASD (Martin, 2014; Mostafa, 2008): none have been found describing how they navigate. Secondly, this study asked children with ASD for their opinions, something few studies concerning the designed environment have done. Generally, studies interpret children's behaviors by observation or a questionnaire to caregivers or educators. Lastly, in an era of misinformation, disseminating research to a broader audience is expedient. This is relevant to ASD where misconceptions abound, e.g., the notion that every person with

ASD has savant abilities as represented by the character in *Rain Man* (Levinson & Johnson, 1988). The causes of ASD are controversial, particularly persistence that vaccines cause autism despite evidence to the contrary (DeStefano, Price, and Weintraub, 2013). I had previously explored poetry to disseminate findings and turned to this medium.

Poetic Translation

Translating data into poetry has been used in various fields, including design, education, mental health services, and market research (Canniford, 2012; Glesne, 1997; Irish & Bruin, 2018; MacNeil, 2000; Smart, 2014; and Ward, 2011). The most common method is poetic transcription, where interview transcripts are coded and analyzed into thematic poems (Glesne, 1997; Irish & Bruin, 2018; Ward, 2011, and others).

Why do poetic translation? Prose is the scientific norm in qualitative research. Authors in various fields expound the benefits of poetry:

- 1) To create empathy, at its best “the reader comes to know the life of another with the minimum of words” (Glesne, 2010; Sparkes et al., 2013, p.165; Ward, 2011).
- 2) It eschews dense research text to appeal to non-academics (Irish & Bruin, 2018; MacNeil, 2000; Ward, 2011).
- 3) It presents the emotional side of the participant's experience beyond a purely narrative format, especially for hard to measure experiences (Canniford, 2012), appropriate for children with ASD in this study.
- 4) It can be used as a tool to describe sensory phenomena (Canniford, 2012), particularly relevant to this study.
- 5) It represents new ways of giving voice to and understanding the perspectives of the researcher, participants, and readers (Canniford, 2012; Glesne, 1997; MacNeil, 2000).

- 6) It can bridge scientific and humanistic research, combining the “strengths of science with the rewards of humanities” (Glesne, 1997, p. 204, quoting Stoller; Sparkes, Nilges, Swan & Dowling, 2013).
- 7) It provides opportunities for creativity and an aesthetically pleasing way of representing data (Glesne, 1997; Canniford, 2012).
- 8) For people with disabilities, it can get away from “them” versus “us” (Ward, 2011).
- 9) It is a novel, unexpected method that is both “dramatic and memorable” (Canniford, 2012; Irish & Bruin, 2018; Sparkes et al., 2013).
- 10) It supports social action research, sometimes more than a traditional collection of quotes (Canniford, 2012; Sparkes, et al., 2013).

A limitation to poetic translation is that it could be viewed as insufficiently scholarly, although more social and behavioral researchers are using it to explore research questions (Canniford, 2012; MacNeil, 2000; Ward, 2011).

As to the how of poetic translation, Glesne (1997) states there is no prescribed way of doing it. Most researchers take their original transcriptions and code and organize them into themes as in typical narrative analysis. Most make their own rules for translating the data into poetry, e.g., keeping chronological format, adding punctuation and conjunctions, and deleting extraneous words. The outcome is not Shakespearean, but, as Glesne (1997) explains, “it moves in the direction of poetry” (p. 213). My challenge was that I had fewer verbal data to tell participants’ experiences using their words alone, but I had additional data including observations and behavior mapping. I therefore uniquely crafted the poems using participants’ words combined with additional data.

Method

This was an exploratory study, affording the researcher an opportunity to investigate a new topic of interest (Babbie, 2010). The aim was to explore how children with ASD navigate around an unfamiliar school. To assist, navigational aids were erected in the corridors, namely doors with applied color, floors with applied colored circles and squares, and signage with text and related images (see Figure 1). The colors selected, red, yellow, green, and orange, contrasted with existing colors in the corridors. The study received Institutional Review Board approval. Participants ($n=4$) agreed to take part by signing a child assent form with the informed consent of parents or guardians. Participants were diagnosed with ASD and attended a school summer program, part of the school closed off but available for the study, ensuring participants were unfamiliar with the route. Before the study, each child was observed in class twice for one hour over a two week period so they could get to know me, as some children with ASD dislike strangers, and because their behaviors in class could frame their actions as they navigated.

The day each child was due to participate, I collected him or her from their classroom and took them to the start of the route. Using a verbal script, I led each child around the corridors, pointing out navigational aids on the way to the destination, a room designated the Art Room. The method of pointing out reminders was used because children with ASD often learn by prompts (Earles-Vollrath, Cook, Robbins, & Ben-Arieh, 2008). The child's task was to collect a book from the Art Room, providing motivation. The route contained several opportunities to take a different route. At the destination, we retraced our steps, me pointing out reminders along the way. Back at the start, I asked the child to lead me back to the Art Room to collect the book, telling me what they remembered as they navigated. At the end of the task, each participant was interviewed about their experience.

Data collected included observations, behavior mapping, video and audio recordings, interviews, and reflective journal notes. The interview contained 12 questions, some on a Likert scale of “smiley faces” from *very unhappy* to *very happy*, some closed questions with a follow-up. After each participant had finished, I recorded my reflections.

A phenomenological approach was taken to describe participants' actions while taking part in the study, based on researcher observations. In a phenomenological approach, "People describe their world . . . as they make sense of it" (Babbie, 2010, p. 334). I recorded the actions of children with ASD and listened to what they said to try to understand the world through their eyes. According to Babbie (2010), phenomenologists try to interpret participants' “perceptions of the world” (p. 334), in this case, their experience navigating around a school. This approach helps us understand the “lived experiences” of people (Creswell, 2013, p. 13; Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012, p. 32).

Findings

Here, I describe each participant’s actions and experiences in traditional narrative format, using quotations. An active voice is used for clarity and to convey the participatory nature of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Afterward, I use the narrative description, observational notes, and interview transcripts to highlight key elements of the participant’s experience and create poems around them. Participants’ words and actions are translated from my first-person perspective, the researcher becoming the first-person narrator. This provides a subjective view of participants’ experiences but uses their words and actions to tell their story. For one poem, I experimented with translating in the third person which has the advantage of less bias or intrusion from the researcher’s voice. All participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Danny’s Experience

Danny is the youngest participant, aged eight. He walks awkwardly, feet noticeably splayed. The first time I observe him, Danny is playing a game with a teacher and classmates, but he is disengaged, not talking, or participating. He moves to another table to play a different game but remains uninterested, refusing to participate until the teacher finally persuades him to join in. The second time I observe him, Danny has refused to cooperate in class. He spends the period standing or sitting in the corridor as a teaching assistant watches over him, occasionally talking to him. He is silent, refusing to make eye contact, and does not respond when she suggests getting a snack or gives him a paper and pencil.

When I collect Danny from class and explain what we are going to do, I am not sure how much he comprehends. He makes no eye contact but nods in acquiescence that he is ready. During the walk to the start point, there is little conversation, Danny avoids eye contact and walks close to the wall away from me. I am concerned that, based on my previous observations, he may not cooperate in the study. At the start point, I explain what we will be doing, but I am unsure how much he understands. I begin walking and reading the script. At the mention of the first signs, Danny's face lights up, and he points at and reads the signs. It is as if he realizes he can do the activity. I explain the images accompanying the signs. Danny reads all the signs, pointing at them as he goes. Sometimes he walks in front of me. Sometimes he reads the signs ahead of my script.

Proceeding through the Media Center, Danny confidently reads all the signs. Out of the Media Center, he automatically follows the red squares on the floor ahead, before I can draw his attention to the other possible routes. I call Danny back to look at three music signs and explain the images. Danny continues, following the green squares without considering the other possible

route, about 8' ahead of me. Danny reaches the Art Room ahead of me and reads the sign. I explain this is our destination. On the return trip, Danny continues to read the signs, pointing out those we passed earlier, usually walking ahead of me.

As Danny sets off to lead me to the Art Room, he reads all the signs, pointing as he goes, about 8' in front of me. He enters the Media Center, fluently reading all the signs along the yellow corridor, unhesitatingly walking the correct route behind the library counter. He has no hesitation out of the Media Center following the red corridor. He reads all the music room signs and claps at one, maybe in delight he has remembered or in recognition of music. At the green washroom sign, he points out the image of children. He walks ahead down the green corridor, goes directly to the Art Room, and waits outside for me. I tell him to go in and collect the book.

In the interview afterward, Danny is "very happy" that he found the book inside the Art Room. He thought it was easy. He says he would be "very happy" finding the Art Room on his own because he went on the green path, his favorite color. When asked what three things he remembers in the corridor, Danny recalls the four colors, orange, yellow, red, and green. When probed, he cannot remember any objects seen in those colors. When asked what colors he remembers seeing, Danny repeats the four colors. Danny is asked what shapes he remembers and recalls, "Squares, orange squares, and squares, squares leading us to the Art Room." Regarding signs, Danny calls off every classroom sign in order. When asked about images, he remembers the washroom woman and man; the classroom sign with three students and a teacher; instruments; and "the media guy in the office." In answer to how he feels when he goes to a new place and has to find his way around, Danny says he feels "very happy" because we were following the path. He seems to be referring to the navigational activity and does not understand the actual question when pressed.

From the data, the main items I noted about Danny were the positive effect the navigational aids had on him compared to the taciturn behavior he had exhibited previously, his lack of engagement until he saw the navigational aids, and how the color in the environment positively affected him. This enjoyment is highlighted in the poem.

Very Happy

1

You won't look at me, won't talk to me,

Won't answer my questions,

You keep a distance between us

Steadfastly.

I explain what we're going to do but I'm not sure you understand

But then, you see the colored signs and your face lights up!

You can read the signs!

You see the colored shapes on the floor and you follow them.

I wonder, were I not there, would you still follow them?

"Library," "Music Room," "Classroom," and then "Art Room"!

You've found what we were looking for.

2

Afterwards I ask, tell me, what do you remember, what colors?

"We went on the orange, yellow, red, and green"

And tell me, what shapes do you remember?

"Squares, orange squares, squares leading us to the Art Room"

And tell me, what signs and pictures do you remember?

“Instruments and instruments, a media guy in an office”

And tell me, how did you feel?

Very happy, “because we were following the path.”

Freya's Experience

Freya is 9½ years old. She currently attends the school in an area reserved for younger age groups, so is unlikely to have been to the study site. Her Special Education teacher tells me Freya cannot find her way to the special education room, a short distance from her classroom, and must be escorted to and from the bus to the classroom. She was only recently able to find the short route to the restroom on her own. The teacher attributes this to her anxiety. During the observation period, Freya initiates conversation with her classmates and raises her hand to answer the teacher's questions. The class moves to the computer room, and I watch Freya working well with a partner. Back in the classroom, Freya is attentive, carries out instructions promptly, and interacts well with her teacher and classmates. She appears relaxed and smiles often.

On the day of the study, I am concerned Freya may be reluctant to accompany me due to her anxiety. I enter the classroom and wait while Freya finishes her task, but she has difficulty concentrating, keen to go with me. On the way to the start, I notice Freya walks awkwardly on her tiptoes, which slows her pace. At the start point, Freya walks beside me, listening and looking around. In the red corridor, Freya says, “Presidents.” She has noticed pictures of presidents on one wall. Outside two classrooms, Freya points to a long, black scrape mark on the floor. On the return trip, she comments on the same scrape. In the yellow corridor, she remarks on the presidents she passed earlier. Proceeding down the yellow corridor, Freya comments on a crocodile, then a fish, then a space poster on the wall. She has been observing

posters, focusing on small details. Back at the start point, Freya points out another black scrape mark on the floor.

At her turn to navigate, Freya begins, telling me, “I told you I know the way.” She is about 4’ ahead of me but looks back, hesitant to leave. I reassure her I am right behind her. Freya calls off all the signs in the orange corridor. She has no hesitation going through the yellow doors into the Media Center, now about 6’ in front of me. In the yellow corridor, she recalls posters of fish, the crocodile, and a cat. Freya walks unhesitatingly behind the library counter, more confident about 8’ ahead of me. She points out “presidents” and “more presidents” in the corridor. Unpausing out of the Media Center, pointing as she walks on the red squares, she calls off Classrooms 7 and 8. She pauses at the music rooms to read all the signs. At the large green square, she moves quickly, without looking at the other classrooms, and goes straight to the Art Room. There is a look of delight on her face as she turns to me and says, “I made it to the Art Room.”

During the interview, Freya said she felt happy with me leading but nervous on her turn. She thought she was not going to make it but afterward felt “very, very, very happy.” Freya thought finding the Art Room was easy. She feels confident she could find the room again. The three things she most remembers are Classrooms 1 and 2, the presidents, and the crocodile. Freya can remember all the colors, red, orange, yellow, and green. For shapes, she remembers squares, rectangles, circles, and an oval in the Media Center (maybe the library counter). Freya has an excellent recall of the signs, calling off the magazines, the office, the music rooms, naming each in order of the route, all the classrooms in numerical order, and the Art Room. When asked about images, she specifically recalls the “No Entry” sign and the paintbrush (the Art Room image). Freya says she feels “really confident” going to a new place as she knows

where she is going. The main thing she remembers is the orange square at the start point.

For the poem about Freya, I wanted to balance her anxiety as a child who currently has to be accompanied around the school with the main observations I noted about her, that learning navigation gave her more confidence, and the specific details she saw in the environment.

I Made It

1

You get lost in the school, your teacher says,

You can't find your way from the bus to the classroom

Can't find your way from the classroom to the playground

As we walk, you stay close by me

I adjust my speed to your tiptoed gait

I sense your nervousness

2

I've shown you the way, now it's your turn to lead me

You walk slowly in front of me, showing me what you can see

A crocodile on a poster, a fish

A small black scrape on the floor

Pictures of presidents

More pictures of presidents

3

I see the big picture, but you,

You see the small details I miss

Nuances and small things in the environment

Your world is not better or worse than mine, but it is different

I need to understand what you see

To help you navigate these surroundings

4

We've got to our destination

You turn to me with a big smile and proudly say,

"I made it to the Art Room!"

I wonder, is this your first success at finding your way?

Afterward, I ask you, how did you feel?

You answer, smiling, "Very, very, very happy."

Gemma's Experience

Gemma is aged 8½. She plays with other children in the class, initiating and responding to conversation. Gemma listens to her teacher and responds appropriately to questions.

Occasionally, she fidgets in her seat. My main observation about Gemma is that she continually needs reminding to do things by staff, e.g., to put her book back, to pick up her toys, to push her chair in. Once reminded, she complies immediately as if she has forgotten rather than is being deliberately non-compliant.

Gemma is reluctant to accompany me for the study, avoiding eye contact, facing the wall as she walks. She was on vacation the previous week, so has not seen me for a while. She walks stiffly from one foot to the other. At the start point, I have difficulty getting Gemma to concentrate as I tell her what we are going to do. Gemma does not pause to listen when walking past the first set of orange doors, and I have to call her attention to point out the classroom image. Gemma turns automatically towards the Media Center doors following the navigational

aids. She asks irrelevant questions, her mind not on the task. Gemma stops in the Media Center corridor to look at a poster of planets. She walks ahead of me following the yellow circles on the floor, and I call her back to look at the "No Entry" sign. Gemma is distracted when she sees what she guesses is a computer room. I call her back to focus on the task. Gemma notices the poster of presidents in the yellow corridor and talks about Abe Lincoln. She also notices a poster on the opposite wall, "reading is magic," and comments she likes it.

I get Gemma back on task. In the red corridor, Gemma naturally follows the red squares on the floor. She walks ahead of me, and I call her attention to the Classroom 7 and 8 signs. Gemma walks ahead and reads the three music signs. I stop her to explain the images. Gemma is distracted by some janitor's equipment off the green corridor. She then becomes distracted for some time on whether this part of the school is a middle school or a high school. Framed pictures of children also distract her. In the green corridor, Gemma asks if we have nearly finished. I draw her attention back to the Art Room. I miss some parts of the script because Gemma is talking about other things and asking questions unrelated to the study. On the return trip, Gemma is again very distracted talking about other things, looking at the poster of presidents, and touching a tactile emblem on a plaque. In the yellow corridor, Gemma stops for a long time to name all the planets on the poster before I can get her back on task. Gemma complains she is tired.

When it is her turn to navigate, Gemma talks about other things. She walks past Classrooms 1 and 2 with no hesitation. She pauses at Classrooms 5 and 6, and I remind her of her task. She enters the yellow corridor and is again distracted by the planets' poster. Gemma continues about 6' ahead of me, looking around and not appearing to be concentrating. However, she has no hesitation in following the yellow circles behind the library counter. Gemma

comments on the presidents again. She goes through the red doors out of the Media Center and has no hesitation following the red corridor, although she does not seem to be paying attention. At Classrooms 7 and 8, she pauses to talk, and I remind her of her task at which she runs a little way along the corridor. She shows no doubt walking down the green corridor, past the green doors. At Classroom 12, I remind Gemma what her task is. She immediately remembers and goes straight back to the Art Room to collect the book.

During the interview process, Gemma interrupts me several times to ask how many questions there are, anxious to finish. Her focus is that the exercise was tiring, so she rates the first question, *How did you feel?* as “just ok” when I was leading as it “was a lot of walking.” She was happy when she was leading because she wanted to lead me. She felt the task was “ok” scary and, when pressed, explained this was because the Art Room was dark and the book was boring. She also thought it was “kind of difficult” because her feet hurt. She thought finding the Art Room “a little bit easy,” but recognized in herself, “I kind of lost track.” Gemma felt it was “just ok” finding the Art Room without directions as it was “a little bit difficult” and her feet were tired, her physical condition affecting her view of the task.

Regarding the three things she saw, Gemma remembers the Media Center with books, the poster about magic, and the washroom sign. For colors, she remembers orange, yellow, and green (but not red). She also remembers squares and circles in a straight line on the floor. For signs, she remembers instruments and the teacher teaching kids but cannot recall the words that accompanied the signs. When she goes to a new place, Gemma feels “a little bit happy” finding her way around as she likes to go to new places. Finally, I ask Gemma what the main thing is she remembers. She replies without hesitation, “The Art Room door was blue with a lot of cool colors.” I think she is confused, (the door was green), but later go back to check and, applied to

the vision panel is a blue film with patterns. I had not noticed this detail.

This poem illustrates Gemma's behavior, both in class and how that transposed to the navigational task. Gemma's distractedness and the need to remind her multiple times to keep on task were a feature of her experience with the constant distractions in the built environment. It provides a snapshot of the difficulty teachers have keeping some children on task. Ultimately, however, Gemma remembered she had a task sufficient to find the Art Room.

Remember

1

I watch you in class

You fidget in your seat

Your teachers constantly remind you

“Put your book back”

“Pick up your toys”

“Push your chair in”

You seem lost in your world

Not obstructive, just oblivious to what you are supposed to do.

2

I take you to the start point

You're reluctant to come

Avoid eye contact

You face the wall as you walk

I note your heavy gait

Listen, listen, while I tell you what to do

Listen, listen, you're going to lead the way to the Art Room

Stop and look

3

"Do they have a gym?"

"I think this used to be a high school"

"Maybe it's a middle school"

Remember, remember the Art Room

"This is a computer room"

"Are we supposed to be in this room?"

"Can only teachers go in here?"

Remember, remember the Art Room

4

"I see books"

"Reading is magic"

"Abe Lincoln"

"George Washington"

"How many presidents are there?"

Remember, remember the Art Room

"When are we going to be done with this?"

"Music Store, Music Office, Music Classroom."

5

"Are these pictures of real kids?"

"Do you know where my mum works?"

“Pluto, Saturn”

“Do you have any children?”

“Have you got a brother in high school?”

Remember, remember the Art Room

“Yes, I was just stopping”

You press your face to the Art Room door.

Harry's Experience

In the first class observation Harry, aged 9½, is talkative but attentive. In the second, he is disengaged and fidgeting. Collecting him from the classroom, Harry is wary of me. It is hard to get him to talk. Maybe this is because he was on vacation the previous week and has forgotten me. At the start point, he listens intently to instructions, nods assent, but makes no eye contact. He walks unusually close to me. He is silent on the route. In the yellow corridor, Harry walks ahead of me, looking around to observe. I call him back to point out a sign. Harry moves ahead again, silently. At the turns into the red and the green corridor, Harry is ahead of me, automatically following the navigational aids. On the return trip, Harry nods at the three red music doors. In the yellow corridor, he is about 2' ahead. He looks anxious, slightly ahead down the orange corridor.

At his turn at navigating, Harry starts quickly without waiting for me to finish the script, about 8' ahead, silent. He enters the Media Center, looks around confidently, then looks back for me, about 8' ahead. Harry quickly and unhesitatingly walks behind the library counter. At the red corridor, he is about 8' ahead. He pauses to look at Classrooms 7 and 8 as if to remember but does not look at the three red music doors. At the large green square, Harry pauses, facing the green corridor, and says, “Which way?” “Which way do you think?” I ask. He points towards

the green route and says again, “This way?” seeking reassurance. I ask if he remembers anything about that way, if it looks familiar. He looks around, points again, and walks down the green corridor. Harry walks slowly past the first two green doors, looking at them intently, then speeds up as if he has remembered, about 8’ ahead of me. He finds the Art Room.

During the interview, Harry expresses he was “a little scared,” worried we were going to get lost. He felt “just ok” when he was leading but was unable to explain why. He did not find the task difficult: he thought it was easy following the colors orange, green, and red. When questioned how he would feel if he had to find the Art Room on his own, Harry said "unhappy," when pressed because he had already done it. He seemed to be expressing he did not want to repeat the task. The three things Harry remembered were doors, colors, and signs. He recounted all four colors, orange, green, red, and yellow. For shapes, Harry remembers yellow circles and squares on the floor. He remembers signs for classrooms and workrooms but cannot remember any of the images that accompanied them. Harry feels unhappy when he has to go to a new place without his parents or someone he knows. The main thing he remembers is collecting the book.

The key point that came out of the data was Harry’s anxiety, so, for the poem, I focused on data describing his anxiety throughout the exercise and the many navigational aids he remembered that helped him. To experiment with an equitable approach, this poem is written in the third person, participant and researcher given equal voice.

The Book

1

Harry is wary of the researcher

He won’t talk on the way to the start point

He listens intently to instructions, nods assent,

But makes no eye contact

He walks unusually close to the researcher

Silent.

2

At his turn, Harry starts off quickly, silently.

He enters the Media Center, looks around confidently,

Walks quickly behind the library counter

At the large red square he is ahead

At the large green square he pauses, "Which way?"

"Which way do you think?"

"This way?"

She asks if he remembers anything about that way, if it looks familiar.

He looks around, points again, and walks down the green corridor.

He speeds up as if he has remembered,

He finds the Art Room.

3

Harry says he was "a little scared,"

Worried they were going to get lost.

"Just ok" when he was leading

But did not find the task difficult,

It was easy following the colors

Orange, green, and red

Doors, colors, and signs,

Four colors, orange, green, red, and yellow.

Shapes

Yellow circles on the floor

Squares on the floor

Signs for classrooms and workrooms

But can't remember any pictures (on the signs)

The main thing Harry remembers is collecting the book.

Limitations

The validity of the findings hinge on four main criteria, credibility (meticulously analyzing data); integrity (acknowledging researcher bias); authenticity (keeping true to what participants said); and criticality (reflecting on the research and researcher input) (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Credibility was achieved by correlating multiple data collection points, such as observation notes, behavioral maps, interview transcripts, and audio and video recordings. The researcher aimed to be true to the research, with frequent bias checks, but acknowledges the potential for bias, particularly as most of the poems are written from the narrator's perspective. Also, member checking of the narrative and poetic translation was not feasible with the child participants (Crouch & Pearce, 2012).

Conclusions

The traditional descriptive, narrative format of the qualitative data described fully how each participant behaved during the study as they navigated the school environment. Using some of the participants' own words helped illuminate the data. Reporting pre-study observations provided a context for behaviors during the study. The descriptions necessitated several pages per child which take time to read, potentially tedious for a non-academic audience.

The poems, however, helped get at the essence of the data. The main experiences each child had while navigating, and what they thought about it afterward, are captured in few words and verses that can be quickly read. The poems drew out more “quotes” from the data than the narrative version. They provided vivid descriptions, such as the images of Gemma, continually distracted, which helped explain her actions in the environment, or Danny, entranced by the navigational aids as he followed the path. The poetic use of alliterating some of the repetitive behaviors of the participants, e.g., Gemma’s continual distractions, underscore that common ASD trait.

Using participants’ own words and behaviors drew out facets of the children’s experiences. Poetic translation was able to emphasize these findings succinctly. The colored navigational aids applied to the corridors particularly helped Danny, who had been very hypo-stimulated, to engage with the environment and thus with the navigational task. The colored aids also positively affected Harry who remembered most of them when interviewed.

A noticeable finding was the seemingly irrelevant details that Freya and Gemma noticed in the environment that helped them to navigate, typifying weak central coherence (Baron-Cohen, 2008; Frith, 2003). Both girls remembered specific details on posters that helped them find their way. Freya used small scrapes on the floor. Despite all the environmental elements that distracted Gemma from her task, she remembered it was important to find the Art Room and, in her own way, using her own remembered navigational aid, (the colored film applied to the door), was able to find the destination. The poems were able to emphasize these specific traits without extraneous words.

The emotional state of participants was also emphasized by the poetic translation, from Danny’s delight at following the colored path, to Freya, relieved and proud she found the Art Room, to Harry, anxious and unsure. Gemma’s physical condition, the effort she had walking,

affected her enjoyment of the navigational task. The children's responses and behaviors were individual, maybe due to the spectral nature of ASD or the small sample size. The findings are captured in the narrative format but in the poetic translation the essence of the participant's experiences is heightened, empathetic.

The poetic translations could be disseminated beyond an academic audience, especially to educators and parents of children with ASD. It would also be interesting to explore other novel ways of sharing data to make it more accessible to a non-academic audience who could benefit from the knowledge, e.g., dance or drama. As Glesne (1997) writes, "Researchers need to be aware of many ways to re-present data and to experiment with them to learn about their data, themselves in relation to the data, and about their skills and abilities to communicate inquiry in different ways" (p. 219). Poetic translation can provide a compelling format to draw out research findings, particularly for marginalized populations (Ward, 2011), and deserves to be explored.

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