

Encountering and finding purpose in life. Perspectives of high-functioning autistic students: a participatory study

Why Purpose?

UK advice to schools on the teaching of spiritual, moral, social and cultural education (SMSC) no longer makes reference to students reflecting on 'meaning and purpose' in their lives. Nevertheless, purpose is recognised to be an important predictive variable of physical and mental health (McKnight and Kashdan, 2009). Following, key US authors in the field, William Damon and Kendall Bronk, this study is a focus specifically on 'purpose in life', to be understood by adolescents. These authors do not conflate meaning with purpose.

Work on 'purpose' with autistic youth is nascent. Wide research suggests that autistic young people suffer from higher anxiety and more mental health challenges than their non-autistic peers (Ghaziuddin et al., 2002). A driving question behind this research is whether autistic individuals suffer even more than those without autism, in the struggle to contend with life. Viktor Frankl (1946) famously stated: 'Suffering presents us with a challenge to find our goals and purpose in our lives that make the worst situation worth living through'.

Hypothesis

Might autistic young people, who have a clearer idea of purpose, find it easier to have direction in life after completing school - to have a more positive outlook on their future?

UK Based Research

Little is known of work on 'purpose' in the UK. One project found was launched in October 2017 at the University of Birmingham at the Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues. It was entitled: 'Flourishing from the Margins: Living a good life and developing purpose in marginalised young people' (Arthur et al., n.d.). This was a mixed methodological study, including large scale surveys, the development and trial of an educational intervention and in-depth interviews.

Key findings were:

Participants in non-mainstream provision (27.4%) showed greater indications that they had a sense of purpose in life than those in mainstream settings (24.2%). More than half of all participants felt that they understood their life's meaning, and nearly two-thirds of participants indicated that they had a good sense of what made their life meaningful. (Arthur et al., n.d.).



'The man without a purpose is like a ship without a rudder'.
Thomas Carlyle. 1795-1881. Historian, satirical writer, essayist.

Figure 1 - Copitch A., 2014.
Navigation by the stars. Oregon,
USA. (Adam Copitch 's own
private collection).

Aim: To find out if purpose in life is evident in the way autistic young people are living their lives and whether they find this to be a beneficial construct

Chosen Population

A sample of autistic young people are to be sought, with an IQ of 70+. They will be aged 16 and above, in schools and higher education institutions in England.

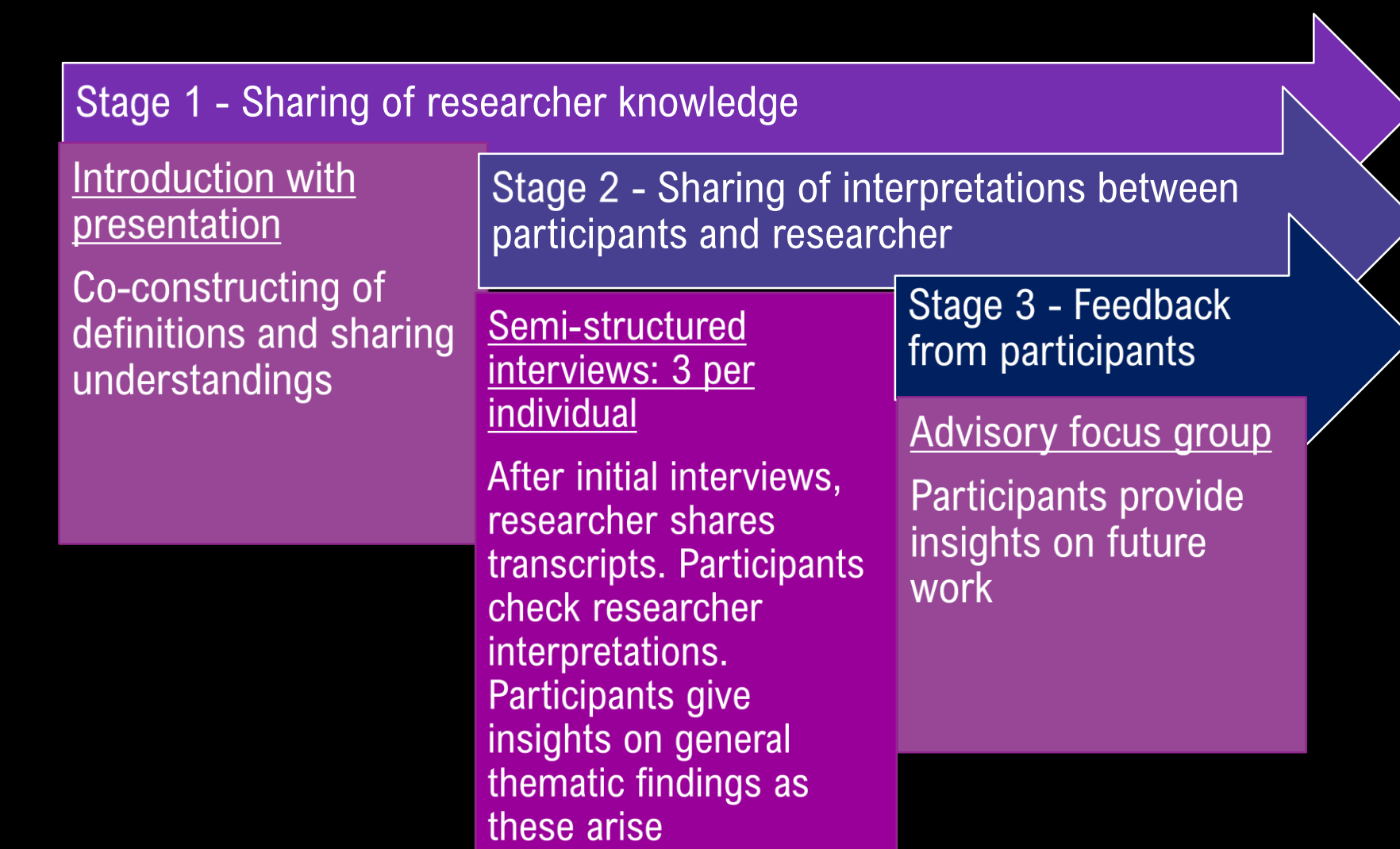
A Participatory Approach

A key factor in the choice of a participatory design model is to give the participants 'a voice'. They will be encouraged from Stage 1 to co-construct definitions. Their interpretations of general themes arising during Stage 2 will be key in the planned phenomenological design model (Figure 2).

This central work will involve semi-structured interviews where encounters and engagement with purpose are to be discussed. In Stage 3, participants will be invited to consider the research implications. Views encountered may reveal whether there could be an advantage to accommodating work on purpose into the curriculum for this diverse group.

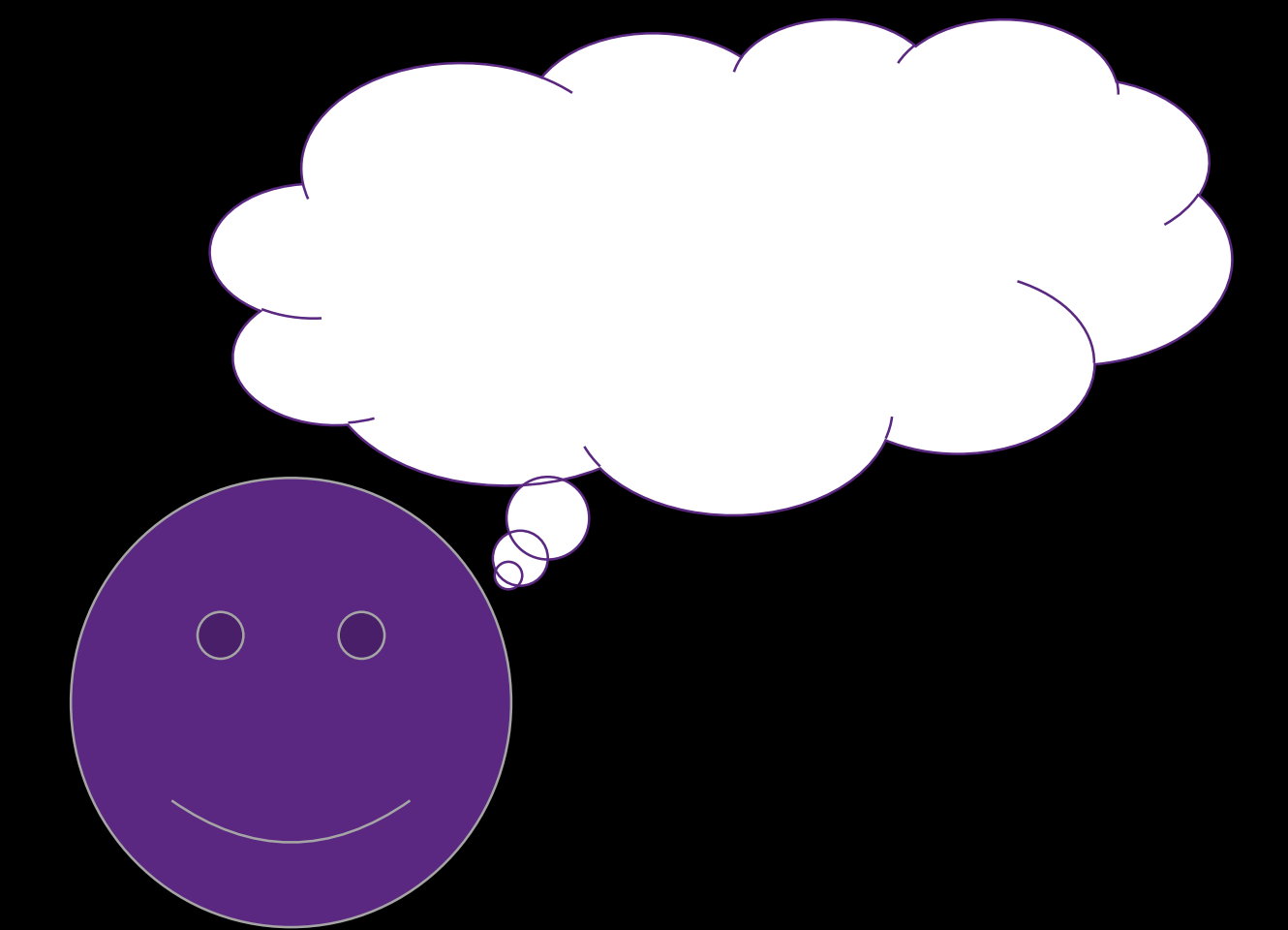
3 Stage Itinerary

Figure 2



From a Library of Questions to be asked

- When in your life – inside or outside of school, has something really made you feel that you are learning more about yourself? What was that?
- What kind of things do you really care about? Why do you care about these things?
- Are there qualities in other people that you admire?
- Who do you look up to and why?
- What do you think it means to have 'a good life'?



References

- Arthur J., Thompson A., Kristjansson, K. and Moller, F. (n.d.) 'Flourishing from the Margins: Living a good life and developing purpose in marginalised young people'. University of Birmingham. The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues. Available at: <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/FlourishingFromtheMargins.pdf> (accessed: 9th March 2020).
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