

# Supporting SEMH needs through **wordless picture stories**

Jo Egerton, Barry Carpenter and Sheila Hollins share the work and findings of The Open Book Project, Phase 2.

**B**eyond Words, through the externally funded Open Book Project, investigated how teachers would use their wordless books to support the Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs of pupils with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans.

The March edition of nasen Connect featured the Phase 1 (2018/19) outcomes of a whole-class approach. This article reports on Phase 2 (2019/20), in which teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) supported individual pupils with specific SEMH needs.

Nationally, 4 in 10 young people with learning disabilities experience mental health problems (Emerson and Hatton, 2007). However, the SEMH needs of pupils diagnosed with learning disabilities are often overlooked due to 'diagnostic overshadowing' – when mental health needs are treated as integral to learning disability, instead of as secondary disabilities arising from unrelated and treatable causes. The most frequent needs of Open Book pupils were around emotional difficulties (46 per cent), social communication/interaction (45 per cent) and behavioural self-regulation (37 per cent); least common was high-level social and environmental risk to or from others (8 per cent).

Ensuring parental consent, the 22 project schools were each asked to support four pupils through one-to-one or small group sessions; 84 pupils (75 per cent secondary age) completed Phase 2. Each pupil attended 3-15 Books Beyond Words

sessions, although some were cancelled due to lockdown. Phase 1 teacher leads cascaded their Books Beyond Words/SEMH training to 18 teacher and 67 TA colleagues, and Beyond Words donated up to three copies each of six Books Beyond Words titles chosen by schools to meet their pupils' SEMH needs. Each TA supported at least one pupil.

Beyond Words picture stories follow book characters facing a range of issues affecting their SEMH (including Covid-19). All 22 schools chose to work with *Making Friends* and/or *Hug Me, Touch Me* (male/female stories following a young person as they try to find friends in safe and unsafe ways). *Feeling Cross* and *Sorting It Out* was read in 16 schools. The next frequently read group of book titles (in four to five schools a piece) were associated



BIO

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BIO

**JO EGERTON**

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with preparing for and coping with adulthood. For example:

- *Speaking Up for Myself* – focus: building self-confidence, self-esteem and advocacy skills
- *Peter’s New Home* – focus: life-changes, making new friends, and missing family.
- *Cooking with Friends* – focus: living healthily and enjoying life with friends
- *Belonging* – focus: overcoming loneliness and isolation
- *Ron’s Feeling Blue/Sonia’s Feeling Sad* – focus: overcoming depression linked to specific issues.

The most challenging titles were chosen by a single school only with specific relevance to a particular pupil’s situation, such as: a parent dying; escaping from, or recovering from, abuse; or an imprisoned family member.

### Evidence was collected in several ways:

- Pupil response – a half-termly Reflective Diary and Engagement Profile (Carpenter et al., 2011, 2015) monitored individual

pupil learning, session engagement and informed forward planning.

- Three key SEMH issues forms logged priority discussion points that emerged during sessions and noted each pupil’s most important learning and comments.
- End-of-project Experience and Confidence Questionnaires (ECQs) surveyed teachers’ and TAs’ ideas and opinions about project outcomes for their pupils and themselves.


### As in Phase 1, teachers and TAs found that pupils experienced:

- Books Beyond Words as motivating – evidenced by high/ increasing levels of participation and initiation.
- Deeper understanding of social context and risk
- Opportunities to consider their own behaviours and to discover alternatives in a non-personal way
- Adult encouragement to articulate and apply what they had learned.

Teachers were asked for their perceptions of the impact on case study pupils of using Books Beyond Words in relation to their SEMH needs. Apart from one teacher (who reported ‘no impact’), 36 rated the impact as ‘positive’, of whom 67 per cent (24) stated this was ‘very positive’.

### PUPIL ENGAGEMENT

TAs recorded Engagement Profile observations against the seven indicators: responsiveness, curiosity, investigation, discovery, anticipation, persistence and initiation (Carpenter et al., 2011, 2015). Based on these, 83 of 84 pupils showed positive engagement, including 16 who maintained a consistent positive engagement e.g. recalling what had happened in the previous session, anticipating story events, asking questions, relating the story to their



**BIO**

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own experience, initiating responses and ideas. Sixty-four pupils increased their level of engagement with 27 of these demonstrating a high level of increase. For example, this was one pupil’s experience:

**NOVEMBER 2019:** Responded negatively to sessions, struggling to cope with the change of routine.

**DECEMBER 2019:** Still sitting outside the small group, he gradually started listening in. Towards the end of the session, he joined the group and contributed to the discussion.

**FEBRUARY 2020:** Participating and responding positively to one-to-one sessions by asking probing questions and showing consistent interest in books.

**FINAL PROFILE:** He related his own feelings and experiences to book scenarios. Most sessions were one-to-one with staff, but at times he would join the other pupils by ‘just taking himself to the group’.

Only one pupil showed an overall negative outcome, despite encouragement from staff. Due to her perception of her physical difficulties and accompanying negative self-talk, she was unable to engage with the chosen story, *Rose Gets in Shape*.

Most teachers (27 of 34) said that their confidence had increased during Phase 2 through training and supporting colleagues; 59 per cent (16) felt it had increased ‘a lot’; others (7) already felt confident.

TAs valued formal training cascaded by teachers and took confidence from the support provided by the books’ structure and guidance. Those using the Books Beyond Words e-Learning modules rated them highly.

All responding teachers (N=34) believed their school was very likely (94 per cent) or fairly likely (6 per cent) to continue using Books Beyond Words to support pupils’ SEMH in future.

‘TAs have become more confident to teach pupils on both a 1:1 and class level regarding Books Beyond Words and have become more engaged in the day-to-day running of the classroom/department as a result’  
(SLT lead)

