

Story Links: working with parents of pupils at risk of exclusion

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This paper presents the results of the evaluation of the 20-month Story Links project delivered by the University of Chichester in collaboration with the Centre for Therapeutic Storywriting and funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA). Story Links is a ten-week intervention that involves pupils at risk of exclusion and with poor literacy, along with teachers and parents, in co-creating stories that address the pupils' emotional and behavioural issues. These stories are then used to develop the pupils' reading skills. The theoretical background draws on Bowlby's concept of attachment and research that highlights the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement. Analysis of the co-created stories showed a high correlation between the story metaphor and the child's presenting of emotional issues as identified by the parents and professionals. The findings also showed a significant increase in parental involvement in their child's learning and improvement in both pupils' behaviour and pupils' attitudes to learning.

Key words: Story Links; parent partnership; therapeutic storywriting; behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESDs); Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Introduction

This paper is a summary of a more extensive report (Waters, 2009) that evaluated the impact of the parent-partnership Story Links programme. The roll-out of this programme was part of a wider Story Links Project, co-funded by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, which had three strands:

- Strand 1: delivery of three-day Story Links **training** to five cohorts of education professionals supporting pupils at risk of exclusion (55 attended).
- Strand 2: **evaluation** of the impact of the ten-week Story Links Programme, delivered in school by professionals who completed the three-day training, on pupils' emotional and social well-being and academic learning.
- Strand 3: the production of an online **training manual** (Waters, 2010) to support professionals using the intervention in schools.

The overall project spanned 20 months, with the evaluation research strand (summarised here) conducted over an 18-month period.

What is Story Links?

Story Links grew out of the established Therapeutic Storywriting Groups (Waters, 2004a; 2004b; Waters 2008) which have now been used in over 500 schools in England. Whereas the Therapeutic Storywriting model is a wave 2 group intervention that focuses on developing emotional literacy and **writing skills**, Story Links is a wave 3 intervention with individual pupils and their parents and focuses on developing emotional literacy alongside **reading skills**.

The Story Links model targets pupils aged 6–11 years who have been identified as being at risk of exclusion because of behavioural and emotional issues, and who also have reading skills below those of their peers. For many of these pupils, emotional difficulties in school can be related to attachment difficulties with regard to their parents or carers (Geddes, 2006). Story Links uses joint storywriting, and the metaphors it generates, to encourage the parent/carer to think about the emotional and social well-being of their child. It also aims to involve parents in their child's learning by encouraging them to regularly hear their child read the typed-up co-created stories at home.

Structure of a Story Links session

The Story Links programme runs over ten weeks and is led by an educational professional who has attended the three-day training course. The facilitating professional can be a special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo), SEN support teacher, educational counsellor, learning mentor or inclusion manager. For ease of writing, in this article the term 'Story Links teacher' will be used to refer to the facilitating educational professional in the programme. Sessions with the parent and child last 30 minutes, with a further 30 minutes required by the Story Links teacher for typing up, printing and distributing the story. A teaching assistant (TA), ideally one attached to the pupil's class, also joins in the sessions and implements 2x20 minute school-based follow-up sessions using the written text to develop the child's reading skills during the week. As the model has an open systemic structure, other professionals, such as a learning mentor, home-school liaison officer or social worker engaged in supporting the family, can also be invited to attend sessions. There is an initial session with the parent and pupil to tell them about the programme, deal with any concerns and ensure commitment to the ten-session programme.

The main sessions begin with the teacher taking a few minutes with the parent to review how things have been at home with their child during the week, and in particular to ask how joint reading activities have gone. They are then joined by the TA and the pupil, who will bring some feedback from his/her teacher on their behaviour during the week in class, which is shared with the parent. There then follows a 'feelings check-in' during which the teacher uses active listening skills (empathic verbal reflection) to reflect and contain the feelings expressed by the parent and pupil.

The child then reads the previous week's story to the group, with support from the teacher or the parent. This leads into the central activity of joint story-making. The teacher gives the story opening, which will have emerged from the discussion with the parent about the child's current emotional issues. For instance, if the parent says the child has had angry outbursts, the opening might be: '*Leslie the lion roared. He was furious.*'

Beginning with the child and followed by the parent, each person present then takes a turn to continue the story, with the teacher making notes. The teacher takes responsibility for completing each week's story and then retells the newly created

story to the group. The child leaves the room with the TA and the teacher encourages the parent to reflect on the metaphor/imagery in the newly created story and to think about what metaphors might be included in the next week's story.

Once the parent has left, the teacher types up the story, at the appropriate reading level for the child. This is not in the format of a verbatim report, but the core story line is maintained, with an effort made to include the actual phrases used by the parent and child. A copy then goes home with the child to be read with the parent at home; another copy goes to the teaching assistant for use in the two 20-minute reading skills sessions during the week. See the 'Teachers TV' video clip (www.teachers.tv/video/34482) to view a sample session modelled by the researcher.

Theoretical underpinning

Attachment theory, behaviour and learning

The theory underpinning Story Links draws on attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1988) in the 1950s, which highlights the central importance of the parent-child relationship, particularly in the first 2-3 years of life, to the child's healthy psychological development. While this is now taken for granted by most child professionals, it was a radical departure from the then established developmental models, most of which considered developmental stages as being entirely located within the child. Bowlby emphasised, however, that a child's development can only be considered within the context of their relationship with a primary carer. Ainsworth (1979) then published the results of her 'Strange Situation' clinical experiment, showing that healthy attachment patterns, along with two anxious forms of attachment – avoidant and ambivalent – can be identified at one year of age. Later, Main and Solomon (1986) identified a third form of anxious attachment, which they termed 'disorganised' or 'confused'. With the evidence from this research, attachment theory began to receive widespread acceptance and even to change social policy, particularly in relation to parental contact for hospitalised children.

While attachment theory has informed health policy for many years, it seems to have had a much lower profile in relation to educational policy. True, it is beginning to inform practice in the early years (Elfer, 2007) – particularly within

the UK Sure Start initiative – but at primary school level and beyond, although attachment anxiety is beginning to appear on pupils' Individual Education Plans (IEPs), there are few educational professionals who have an understanding of attachment theory. This is despite a growing body of research evidence (Sroufe *et al.*, 2000) indicating that poor attachment patterns have a strong correlation not only with BESDS but also with poor educational achievement.

The child brings behavioural patterns from the relational dynamic established with their primary carer into school, and these will affect the quality of their relationships with both peers and adults. Behaviours associated with poor attachment patterns that are exhibited in the classroom may include:

- poor concentration
 - constant talking
 - ignoring instructions in class
 - getting into trouble during breaks
 - refusing to be helped with work
 - presenting explosive reactions
 - exhibiting a sudden deterioration in behaviour when making mistakes.
- (Geddes, 2006)

These are clearly behaviours that can seriously challenge a class teacher, and it is easy to see why these pupils are often at risk of exclusion.

Bowlby suggests that positive attachment is promoted by the parent and child engaging in a mutually enjoyable activity. The Story Links intervention aims to involve parents and pupils with BESDS in such an activity – that of co-created story-making, which, because of the unpredictability and creativity of the activity, is often 'fun' for both parent and pupil.

Hughes (2007) proposes that the co-regulation of affect and the co-construction of meaning are also central to the development of attachment security. Sessions are designed to facilitate a co-regulation of affect – that is, emotional attunement between parent and pupil – in that they provide an opportunity for parent and child to share their feelings with each other and 'tune' into each other's story contributions. In relation to supporting co-construction of meaning, parents are encouraged to use the adult ability to think in story metaphor about their child's emotional anxieties and to create a story that helps the child make sense of their experiences.

The typed-up story is sent home for the pupil to read to the parent and is also used in school as a reading text between sessions. In this way, the written story becomes a positive attachment object, reminding both child and parent of a positive shared educational experience.

The importance of parental involvement in pupils' learning

The pupils targeted for Story Links will be on the special educational needs (SEN) register as a result of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESDs) and poor literacy and are some of the most vulnerable children in our schools. For many of these pupils, their emotional difficulties can get in the way of their learning, and reading skills are often below those of their peers (Cole *et al.*, 1998).

The research of Desforges and Abouchaar (2003), commissioned by the DfES (now DfE), has also highlighted the link between parental involvement and pupils' academic achievement and been highly influential in subsequent government policy. The National Audit of Support, Provision and Services for Children with Low Incidence Needs (2006) further addressed the need to improve parent partnership in meeting the needs of pupils with BESDs at risk of educational exclusion, and also expressed concern about the lack of support for such parents (at 3.39 and 6.25). The Children's Plan (2007) stressed the importance of parent partnership and the discussion paper *Policy Review of Children and Young People* (2007) reiterated these concerns, saying that

‘more can be done to build children's resilience to poor outcomes in key areas, including enhancing educational attainment and building social and emotional skills; and parents and communities are vital to create a supportive environment in which children and young people can develop; more can be done to build their capacity to fulfil this role’ (2007, p. 1).

The Steer report also highlights the role of parents in supporting both children's behaviour and their academic attainment. It points out that while

‘[t]here are few parents who do not want the best for their children, some may not have the confidence to engage with the school and some may feel alienated from school as a result of their own educational experience’ (2009, p. 53).

Parental inclusion in the support of pupils at risk of exclusion is a key element of the Story Links model and clearly supports the policy of parent partnership emphasised in the above key policy documents.

The parent as adult thinker

According to Piaget and Inhelder (1979), it is only around the time of adolescence that children begin to develop the capacity for abstract or meta-cognitive thinking. The interpretation of metaphor, the meaning of which is to transfer something from one level to another, is itself a meta-cognitive skill. This is why a child will accept a story at face value, operating as s/he does at what Piaget calls the 'concrete-operational level', while adults have the ability to intuitively also read story metaphor on another level of meaning. Thus the basic activity of thinking consciously about an issue through metaphor is an adult skill. One of the theoretical principles of the Story Links intervention is that by encouraging the parent to use this adult skill to think about their child's internal emotional world, they are being supported to step into the adult position in relation to their child. This is pertinent as many pupils with behavioural difficulties can take on the role of the parent and present as a 'parentified' child (Jurkovic, 1997). In this case there is something of a role reversal, with the child alternately 'looking after' and also bullying the parent, and the parent often failing to provide appropriate boundaries for the child. With such a dynamic the parent and child often become embattled over quite minor issues. By supporting the parent to use story metaphor to think about their child's emotional and social needs, the parent can reclaim the 'mindful' adult position, thus helping the child to feel contained and 'held in mind' by their parent.

A therapeutic teaching approach

Therapeutic storywriting is a therapeutic teaching approach that uses the educational curriculum as a therapeutic context. It does not require educational professionals to become therapists, but rather to bring psychological-mindedness to their work in supporting pupils with severe social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. As mentioned above, the focus is on addressing the needs of pupils whose behavioural, emotional and social difficulties are getting in the way of their learning. The need to address this overlap between BESDs and learning is

highlighted in the Policy Review of Children and Young People (2007), which refers to the research of Greenhalgh (1994) and states:

‘Social and emotional skills and attainment are mutually reinforcing, either positively or negatively. Some negative emotions (such as sadness, anger) can block learning, while other positive feelings (such as a sense of well-being, feeling safe and valued) promote learning. Managing the emotions can therefore assist learning’ (para 3.28).

The interim Steer Report also concurs with this view and states that learning and behaviour are ‘inseparable issues for schools’ (2009, p. 25).

The Story Links model can be integrated into a school’s Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme, which is a wave 3 intervention that provides support for those individual pupils whose BESDs are giving the school particularly serious cause for concern in terms of both their inclusion in the classroom and their progress in learning. These pupils will usually be on the SEN register at either SA+ or Statement level for BESDs, indicating that their needs require more specialist support than is normally provided by the school.

Evaluation methodology

Research design

Following the delivery of the three-day Story Links Training to 55 professionals supporting vulnerable pupils, the evaluation sought to assess the impact of the ten-week programme on:

- pupils’ emotional and social well-being;
- pupils’ behavioural difficulties and rates of exclusion;
- parental engagement with their child’s learning;
- pupils’ reading skills and engagement with learning.

The evaluation employed a case study design, which included both quantitative and qualitative approaches, to gain in-depth data on the pupil, teacher and parent experiences of the intervention. It also included case profiles of individual pupils and their stories.

The following specific methods were used:

<i>Quantitative</i>	<i>Qualitative</i>
Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Youth in Mind website, 2009), completed pre and post-intervention by class teachers	Pre and post-intervention: semi-structured interviews with individual pupils, parents/carers, class teacher and SL teacher
Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA) (1997), a pre and post-intervention assessment of accuracy and comprehension	Post-intervention: semi-structured interviews with supporting teaching assistant (TA) + SENCO when available Content analysis of parent/pupil stories

Data was analysed thematically across the cases using the qualitative analysis software NVivo 8 and interpretative processing. The findings are reported in theme-based narrative form.

As the primary researcher developed the intervention, a second expert evaluator was employed to monitor the subjectivity of the primary researcher in both the data collection and the analysis.

Target pupil/parent group

Pupils were selected by Story Links teachers on two criteria: first, they were at risk of exclusion due to behavioural, emotional or social difficulties; second, they were least one year behind the reading age (for accuracy and/or comprehension) of their peers. The first 12 pupil/parent sets to complete the ten-week programme were selected for the evaluation. The pupil group consisted of nine boys and three girls drawn from seven schools. Ten Story Links teachers were involved. Another two parents were also selected and took part in the pre-evaluation but are not included in the final evaluation, as one did not complete the intervention in the time frame due to illness and the other was unable to maintain regular attendance.

Four pupils had at least one biological parent who was illiterate. Of the parents who attended sessions, two were illiterate and a further two described themselves as dyslexic. Two pupils had SEN Statements, nine were at SA+ and one was at SA on the SEN register.

Summary of key findings

Note: The names of pupils have been changed for confidentiality reasons and parents and pupils have given permission for their stories to be used in this research.

Impact on pupils' emotional and social well-being

Significant improvement in pupils' overall emotional stress

The pre-intervention interviews with parents and teachers revealed a high incidence of emotional anxiety in the target group of pupils. This finding was confirmed by the pre-Goodman's SDQ for overall stress (Figure 1) completed by the class teacher, which showed three-quarters of the pupils experiencing very high stress levels. Post-intervention, the majority of pupils showed a significant reduction in overall stress.

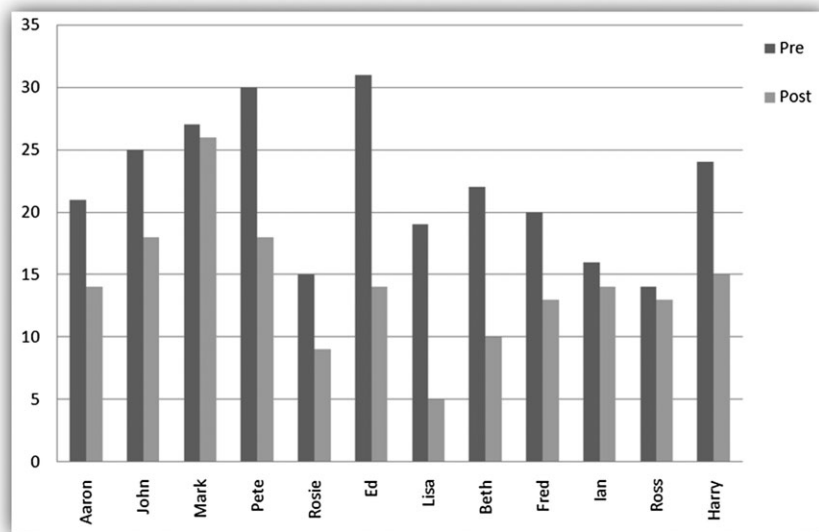
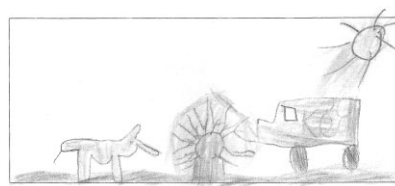


Figure 1. Goodman's SDQ for impact on pupils' overall stress
Key. ≤ 11 = Close to average; 12–15=Slightly raised; 16–18=High; ≥ 19 = Very High

The function and impact of the co-created stories

The stories by parents and pupils had powerful effects, in several ways. First, they often served as a reminder of the nurturing role of the parent. For example:

Bo the Elephant was stropky and used to cry because he had to find food on his own He walked for miles and miles, digging at the ground and sniffing at the tree . . . (then) his keeper came in his lorry with a big box. The box was full of sticky buns which they ate together.



So, Bo knew now that . . . he didn't have to get stropky and cry, trying to find food on his own. His keeper would look after him well.

Second, many of the pupils' stories addressed issues relating to both friendship difficulties and sibling rivalry; third, they enabled the children to address their anxiety through the metaphor in the story.

Prominent themes that emerged in the stories were lack of friends, fear, abandonment and lack of nurturing. Content analysis of the stories indicated that many of the story openings given by the Story Links teacher addressed 'difficult' emotional issues relating to the particular child, which, in their own contribution, they projected on to the story character.

This correlation between the story metaphor and pupils presenting emotional issues is particularly evident in the in-depth pupil profiles included in the full report.

Impact on significant relationships

Experience of positive attachment

The majority of pupils and parents enjoyed coming along to the sessions; parents used words such as 'fun', 'laughter', 'enjoy' and 'giggle' to describe their

experience of the sessions. This is an important finding, as positive attachment takes place when parent and child are both engaged together in a mutually enjoyable activity (Bowlby, 1988).

'I didn't realise, you know, how much he wanted, as I say, I think it was the fact that I was coming into the school as well because even Miss W said he used to get quite excited and he couldn't wait for me to come in' (Pete's mum).

'Brilliant, I really enjoyed the sessions – they used to brighten me up on a Tuesday . . . We had laughs and giggled' (Beth's mum).

What appeared to be particularly important to the pupils was the undivided attention of their parent, without distractions from siblings or household chores. Contact with Teaching Assistants (TAs) also provided opportunities for the pupils to experience positive attachment. The TAs attended the main sessions and also provided 2×20 min follow-up reading practice and drawing sessions each week which pupils had enjoyed, often 'chatting' about things that were on their mind while illustrating their stories. In fact, it was the TA rather than the Story Links teacher who seemed to take on the role of the child's 'substitute attachment figure', providing them with a 'secure emotional base' in school (Bomber, 2007).

Significant improvement in peer relationships

There was a significant improvement in peer relationships; this was indicated by the Goodman's SDQ (Goodman, 1997) completed by the class teacher as well as observations from the parents and school-based professionals, who noted that several of the pupils were more able to manage conflict situations.

Impact on pupils' behaviour and rates of exclusion

Significant improvement in pupils' behaviour in school

By the end of the programme there had been a significant reduction in the Goodman's SDQ score for behavioural difficulties in the classroom for the

majority of pupils who had initially scored above average. This improvement was also noted by parents and Story Links teachers during the interviews.

During the Story Links sessions, some pupils had taken a few weeks to settle in, but all the Story Links teachers reported that pupils' behaviour had, overall, been remarkably good – only a few required reminding to listen and not interrupt others. Some teachers and parents expressed surprise at how well pupils had behaved.

'I was amazed, I was really amazed . . . it was just like seeing him sitting, it must have been quite daunting for him . . . and you know even S (the SL teacher) was amazed.' (Pete's mum)

Impact on exclusion

There was a significant decrease in pupils' rates of exclusion from school, the classroom and the playground (Figure 2). Of the 12 pupils, six had previously been excluded from school, with two of these exclusions being in the last year, and another pupil regularly self-excluded when anxious. During the programme no pupils were excluded from school. In the 12 months prior to the intervention, 11 of the 12 pupils had regularly been removed from the classroom or playground because of their behaviour. During the Story Links Programme the number of removals from the classroom reduced dramatically; there was also a decrease in the number of removals from the playground.

	<i>Exclusion over 12 months pre-Story Links programme</i>			<i>Exclusion during Story Links programme</i>		
	<i>School</i>	<i>Classroom</i>	<i>Playground</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Classroom</i>	<i>Playground</i>
Twice or more per week	0	5	5	0	0	3
About once a week	0	3	0	0	3	1
Less than once a week	2 + 1 self-excluder	2	2	0	1	2

Figure 2. Exclusions pre and post-Story Links

Parental engagement with their child's learning

Parents attended well

Given that many of the parents had not had regular or positive contact with the school before the Story Links intervention, the level of attendance was remarkably good (Figure 3). With the exception of two parents who did not complete the programme, the 12 parent sets included in the evaluation attended seven out of ten of the sessions, with five parents attending all the sessions. Teachers were surprised that parental attendance had been so good. Parental attendance was supported in some schools by teachers providing a pre-intervention meeting for parents, the SENCo's support in choosing parents and regular phone and text message reminders about the times of sessions which were sent to some parents by teachers.

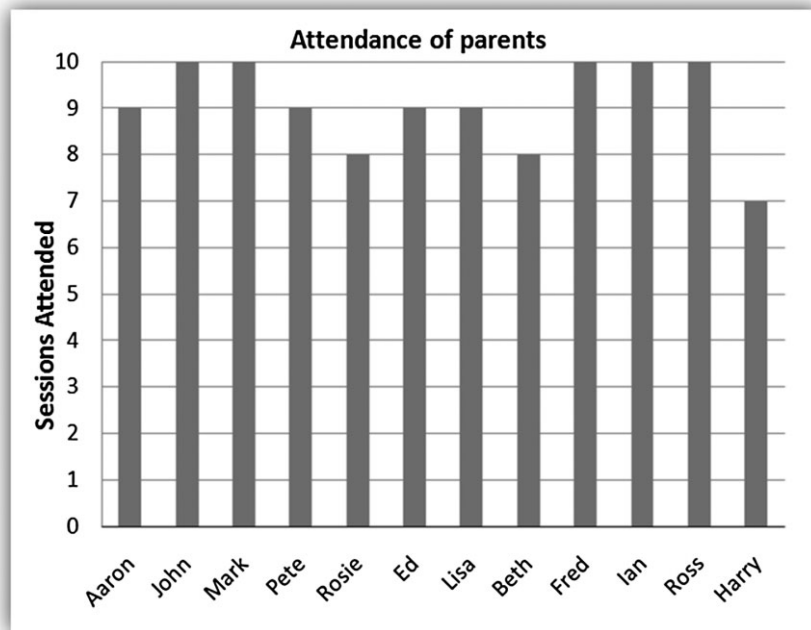


Figure 3. Parental attendance

Positive impact on the home–school relationship

All the teachers and a majority of the parents thought that the programme had had a positive impact on the home–school relationship. For the parents, it was the positive focus on the pupils' learning rather than their poor behaviour that seemed to have made a difference:

J's got behaviour problems so my interaction with the school was horrible all the time – the only interaction was "J's been bad, this has happened, that's happened" . . . now, it's nice to look forward to coming in.' (John's mum)

Teachers commented that many of the parents had either had infrequent contact or a 'tricky' relationship with the school in the past, but that the Story Links Programme had turned this around:

She is the sort of parent who still thinks back to her own experiences . . . and thinks that school is a bad place . . . I think it's overcome that probably with her . . . I mean she says hello to the Head now which is quite an achievement . . . and she knows all the office staff. (SL teacher)

Increase in pupils reading to parent at home

Before the Story Links programme, nearly half of the pupils had never read to their parents at home and only three parents said they heard their child read at least twice a week. Home reading patterns changed dramatically during the programme (Figure 4), with eight parents hearing their child read at home at least twice a week.

Significant factors in this change which were cited by the parents were the increase in their own confidence and the pupils' ownership of the stories.

[He] trusts me now not to get angry with him. I'm a lot more patient with his reading now because I understand the level he's at.' (Ian's mum)

'If I'd have gone to the library to pick out books that he could read like this he wouldn't let me, he wouldn't get them. . . . So, the fact that he's put the input in – I think that made a big difference.' (John's mum)

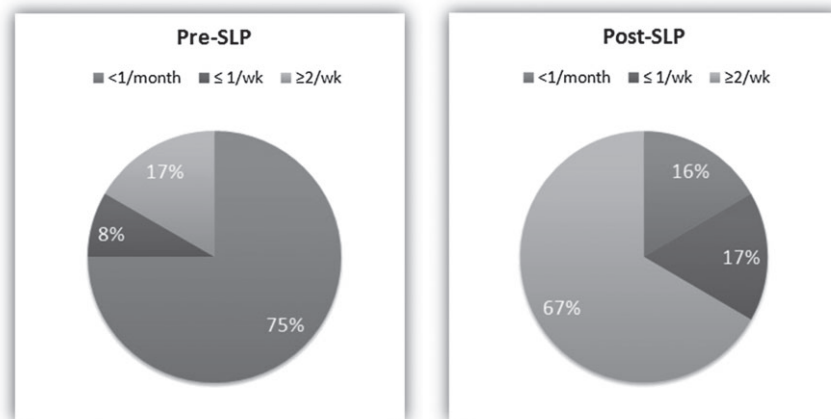


Figure 4. Frequency of reading to parent at home pre- and post- Story Links

Pupils, professionals and parents indicated that where parents did not manage to hear their child read, the reasons were siblings' demands, parents' own poor literacy skills or a lack of time.

Parental engagement with story metaphor

A critical aspect of the intervention was that the parent would engage and reflect on the metaphor in the co-created stories to address their child's behavioural and emotional issues. Most of the Story Links teachers reported that most were able to do this, though some parents were initially more able to do so than others. A quarter of the parents had also begun making up stories with their child at home; in two cases, siblings had also been included in this activity.

Absent dads included in stories

Many of the stories indicated a preoccupation with an absent father. In some stories pupils highlighted a yearning for more contact with their fathers; in others a sense of abandonment. What follows is an extract from a story by 10-year-old

Pete who, like Big George in the story, had no friends to play with and would frequently 'pick on' others:

All the other animals had come to fear and be scared of Big George. When he told them his story he had tears in his eyes.

Big George explained to all the others: 'It is not my fault that I am so mean. 'My Dad's name is Godzilla. My Dad will not play with me. Every time I ask him he won't play.'



In two cases, the Story Links programme led to fathers (both of whom were separated from the mother) coming into their sons' schools for the first time. This had followed from the pupils showing their stories to their father.

Impact on pupils' reading skills and engagement with learning

Significant reduction in hyperactivity and attentional difficulties in the classroom

There was a significant reduction in hyperactivity and attentional difficulties in the classroom. This was indicated both by the Goodman's SDQ and by class teachers' observations.

'He'll now sit and he does attempt to spell out words, sound out words . . . you can see him looking down the page as well to try and work out what that word is.' (Class teacher)

In the Story Links sessions, all pupils engaged well with the story-making aspect and many talked about the stories between sessions. Quite a few remembered the stories very accurately, indicating that they had paid good attention to what had been said.

Minimal increase in reading ability as measured on the NARA

There was minimal progress in the pupils' reading ability as measured by the NARA. Of the 12 pupils, eight were below the 6.01 starting reading age for both

accuracy and comprehension before the Story Links intervention. Four showed an increase in reading age for accuracy and six for comprehension. When the pupils' ages were factored in, the progress was even more marginal: the standardised scores and percentile ranks for accuracy showed a decrease for two pupils and an increase for just one; those for comprehension scores showed an increase for three pupils and a decrease for one pupil.

Overall, only one pupil made significant progress for both accuracy and comprehension, as recorded by the NARA, and this was the pupil with the highest initial NARA score.

Improved engagement and confidence in reading

While the NARA scores indicated that pupils had made only a small amount of progress with their reading skills, teachers and parents commented that all pupils showed an increased interest in the activity of reading. Teachers mentioned how some pupils would now look at books in quiet reading even though they were still not independent readers. Others were able to focus more on sounding out words.

'He became more interested in being able to read, he became much more enthusiastic about wanting to read it. And very pleased that he could, he felt he could read it.' (SL teacher)

The programme also seemed to have an impact on pupils' low self-esteem, a key issue identified by parents and teachers in the initial interviews as impeding the learning of the entire target group. In the post interviews, pupils' increased confidence as readers was a prominent theme.

'Yes, he just felt he couldn't do it [reading] so I think it's given him the confidence to have a go and try rather than just looking at it and thinking "that's too difficult".' (Aaron's mum)

This developing self-confidence was also evident in the SL sessions, not only in terms of how pupils contributed during the sessions but also in their changed body language:

'He originally would loll about and have his head on the table . . . but after the first couple of sessions [he became] much more enthused . . . he would sit up and read . . . his confidence came on leaps and bounds.' (TA)

Concluding remarks

The key findings of the Story Links evaluation, as outlined above, were mainly positive and included: significant improvement in pupils' overall emotional stress; significant improvement in pupils' peer relationships; pupils and parents becoming able to write stories that addressed pertinent emotional issues for the child; sessions and stories themselves supporting positive pupil/parent attachment; significant improvement in behaviour, with a reduction in exclusions from school, classroom and playground; significant reduction in hyperactivity and attentional difficulties in the classroom; remarkably good parental attendance, contrary to many expectations; and increased parental frequency of hearing their child read at home. However, while there was an increase in pupils' engagement and confidence in reading, there was no significant improvement in their standardised reading score as measured on the NARA. A couple of unexpected findings were the frequency with which the story metaphor related to an absent father and the change of dynamic in sessions when a couple attended rather than a single parent.

A dominant theme to emerge from the analysis of stories written in Story Links sessions was that sessions had provided a learning environment in which pupils were able to project their own emotional issues onto the story characters. This was evident in the high degree of correlation between the feelings expressed by the story characters and the pupils' own presentation of behavioural, emotional and social issues as reported by the school-based professionals. Storywriting can provide the child with an opportunity to reframe or 're-story' their personal experiences and it appeared that the pupils, many of whom had experienced difficult life situations, were keen to engage in this process. By transposing characters and events in their lives into the metaphor of the stories the children were able to play with different outcomes to actual dilemmas. In the Story Links sessions parents and pupils were also engaged in 'co-construction' of meaning as they worked together to create a coherent story that sought to resolve emotional issues that paralleled those of the child.

Stories which reflect pupils' emotional anxieties are commonly used in schools to support pupils with BESDs. However, the research findings indicate that by facilitating pupils to create their own stories, which they are involved in either reading or writing themselves, the same activity can have a dual function: that is, it can support emotional well-being while developing literacy skills. The fact is that these pupils are doubly disadvantaged. No matter how much empathy and

emotional support we give them, if these pupils leave school without basic literacy skills, their life chances will be very poor. The ability to read and write develops the child's capacity to think and this in turn supports the development of emotional resilience, as the individual can begin to reflect on their emotions rather than just react to them.

Areas for further research relating to Story Links

The findings from evaluation of the Story Links intervention provided several potential areas for future research. These include exploring ways to engage more fathers in the intervention; refining the reading measuring tools to include an early reading assessment alongside the NARA and also to extend the pre/post-test period; and exploring follow-on support for parents once the Story Links intervention is over.

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