

# Story Links

*Working with Parents of Pupils at Risk of Exclusion*



## Story Links Programme Evaluation

The impact of a parent partnership intervention that uses therapeutic storywriting to support pupils at risk of exclusion

January 2010

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Report for the  
Esmée Fairbairn  
Foundation  
and the  
Training and  
Development  
Agency for  
Schools (TDA)

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Print layout by [verything.com](http://verything.com)

Printed in Brighton

This report was published with the support of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA)

Copies of this report can be downloaded from:

[www.TTRB.ac.uk](http://www.TTRB.ac.uk) or [www.storylinkstraining.co.uk](http://www.storylinkstraining.co.uk)

title page



# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Training Development Agency for schools (TDA) who provided the funding to make this research possible, and especially Jo Rideal at the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Hilary Constable at the TDA for their support and belief in the project.

My particular thanks go to Professor Helen Simons for her role as an external expert evaluator who supported the monitoring of my subjectivity throughout the project. Her expert advice in relation to the overall research design, interview methods and analysis of the data was invaluable. Her comments on the draft of this report were also much appreciated.

I am grateful to the members of the Story Links Steering Group who turned up to meetings at the end of their own work days to support the project. Thanks to Dr Heather Geddes, Dr Leslie Ironside, Paul Myszor, Ian Hickey, Marion Cox, Tessi Archer and Wendy Tidman for all your encouragement and constructive feedback.

I would also like to thank Judith Burns at Home Office for her accurate transcriptions of the interviews and Helen Salgo at [everything.co.uk](http://everything.co.uk) for her work on the document presentation.

And of course a special thank you to all the teachers, parents and pupils who have participated in the Story Links project. I was frequently moved by the power of the stories and experiences that you shared with me in the course of this research.

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# Acronyms Used in the Report

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

ASC: Autism Spectrum Conditions

BESDs: Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties

DCSF: Department for Children Schools and Families (formerly DfES)

LM: Learning Mentor

NARA: Neale Analysis of Reading Ability

NASEN: National Association of Special Educational Needs

PATOSS: Association Parents and Teachers of Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

SDQ: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

SEN: Special Educational Needs

SENCO: Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (teacher)

SERSEN: South-East Region Special Educational Needs Partnership

SL: Story Links

SLP: Story Links Programme

TA: Teaching Assistant

TTRB: Teacher Training Resource Bank



## Executive Summary

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The Story Links programme involved parents and pupils at risk of exclusion in co-creating stories that addressed the pupils' behavioural, emotional and social difficulties and were also used to develop the pupil's reading skills. The programme was delivered by educational professionals who had attended a 3-day Story Links training. The evaluation used a case study approach to provide an in-depth exploration of the impact of the school-based intervention on parents, pupils and their learning.

The evaluation included a pre and post intervention standardised behavioural screening questionnaire completed by classteachers, a pre and post intervention standardised reading assessment, the analysis of over one hundred co-created stories and the analysis of over eighty interviews with parents, teachers, TAs and pupils who participated in the Story Links intervention.

### Key findings

#### *1) Impact on pupils' emotional and social well-being*

##### **A 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 Goodman's SDQ for overall stress completed by the classteacher which showed three-quarters of the pupils as experiencing very high stress levels pre-intervention. Post-intervention, the majority of pupils showed a significant reduction in overall stress.

##### **The function and impact of the co-created stories**

The stories by parents and pupils had a powerful effect in several ways. Firstly, they often served as a reminder of the nurturing role of the parent.

Secondly, many of the pupils' stories addressed issues relating to both friendship difficulties and sibling rivalry. Thirdly, they enabled the children to address their anxiety through the metaphor in the story. Prominent themes that emerged in the stories were those of lack of friends, fear, abandonment and lack of nurture. A 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 pupil's presenting emotional issues is particularly evident in the in-depth pupil profiles included in the full report.

##### **Experience of positive attachment**

The majority of pupils and parents enjoyed coming along to the sessions, parents using 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 engaged together in a 'mutually enjoyable activity'. (Bowlby, 1988).

What appeared to be particularly important to the pupils was the undivided attention of the 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 x 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, 2008).

### **Significant improvement in peer relationships**

There was a significant improvement in peer relationships as indicated by the SDQ, completed by the classteacher, and observations from the parents and school-based professionals who noted that several of the pupils were more able to manage conflict situations.

## *2) 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 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 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 with only a few needing to be reminded to listen and not interrupt others. Some teachers and parents expressed surprise at how well pupils had behaved.

### **Impact on Exclusion**

This was a significant decrease in pupils' exclusion rates from school, the classroom and the playground. Six of the twelve pupils 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 and there was also a decrease in the number of removals from the playground.

## *3) Engagement of parents 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 programme, the level of attendance was remarkably good. Apart from two parents who did not complete the programme, the twelve parent sets included in the evaluation attended seven out of ten of the sessions, with five parents attending all the sessions. Teachers' apprehensiveness about parents not turning up, therefore, did not prove to be the case.

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 to some parents from teachers about the times of sessions.

#### **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.

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.

#### **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 this than others. A quarter of the parents had also begun making up stories with their child at home and 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 and in others a sense of abandonment. 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 on from the pupil showing their stories to the father.

### *4) Impact on pupils' reading skills and engagement with learning*

#### **Increase in pupils' reading to parent at home**

Before the Story Links programme nearly half of the pupils 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 with eight parents hearing their child read at home at least twice a week.

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

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

#### **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 SDQ and observations of classteachers.

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 would remember 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. Eight out of the twelve pupils were below the 6.01 starting reading age for both accuracy and comprehension before the 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.

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 a reader was a prominent theme.

This developing self-confidence was also evident in the Story Links sessions, not only in how pupils contributed during the sessions, but also in their changed body language.

### 1.1 Project overview

This report is an evaluation of the impact of the parent-partnership Story Links programme. The programme involved teachers, parents and pupils, at risk of exclusion and with poor literacy, in co-creating stories through which they might better understand the pupils' emotional and behavioural issues and also support their reading skills.

The overall Story Links Project was co-funded by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. It had three strands:

- Strand 1: the delivery of a three-day Story Links **training** to five cohorts of education professionals supporting pupils at risk of exclusion (55 attended).
- Strand 2: to conduct an **evaluation** (reported here) of the impact of the 10-week Story Links Programme, delivered in school by professionals who completed the 3-day training, on pupils' emotional and social well-being and academic learning.
- Strand 3: the production of a **training manual** to support professionals using the intervention in schools.

The overall project spanned 20 months with the evaluation research strand conducted over an 18 month period.

### 1.2 What is Story Links?

Story Links is a parent-partnership intervention that uses therapeutic storywriting to support pupils' emotional well-being and reading skills. Story Links grew out of the now established Therapeutic Storywriting Groups (Waters, 2004; Waters 2004a; Waters 2008), developed by the principal researcher, with the support of the South-East Region Special Educational Needs Partnership (SERSEN). These have been widely introduced into many schools in England. Whereas the group model is a wave 2 group intervention<sup>1</sup> that focuses on developing emotional literacy and **writing skills**, Story Links is wave 3 intervention with individual pupils and their parents, and focuses on developing emotional literacy alongside **reading skills**.

The Story Links programme, also developed by the principal researcher, involves pupils, parents and teachers in the co-creation of stories that address the pupils' behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESDs). It targets pupils aged 6-11 years who have been identified as being at risk of exclusion 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 their parents or carers (Geddes, 2006). Story Links is a 10-week intervention that 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

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Primary National Strategy (2003) uses a 3 wave model of intervention: Wave 1: Quality education of all (whole class); Wave 2: Small group; Wave 3: individual work.

learning by encouraging them to regularly hear their child read the typed-up co-created stories at home.

### 1.3 *Background and context*

The pupils targeted were all on the special educational needs (SEN) register for 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 National Audit of Support, Provision and Services for Children with Low Incidence Needs (2006) identified both a lack of support for children at risk of educational exclusion and schools' limited capacity to support pupils with BESDs (6.32 & 6.37). This audit also highlighted the need to improve parent-partnership in meeting the needs of these pupils and identified a lack of support for parents (3.39 & 6.25).

Research by Desforges & Abouchar (2003) has shown that, up to the age of eleven years, parental involvement has a greater impact on pupils' academic achievement than their school. However, the parents of this group of pupils at risk of exclusion are often the least likely to be engaged with their child's learning (Social Exclusion Unit: Reaching Out, 2006).

The Story Links model draws on the concepts of attachment (Bowlby 1988; Geddes, 2006; Bomber, 2008); emotional containment (Bion, 1984); and creating a 'potential space' (Winnicott, 1999) where parent and child can meet in a 'mutually enjoyable activity' that supports positive relationship. The Story Links intervention aims to involve parents and pupils **in such a** 'mutually enjoyable activity' - of co-created storymaking \_which, because of the unpredictability and creativity of the activity, is often 'fun' and gives rise to spontaneous laughter.

Hughes (2004) also proposes that the '*co-regulation of affect and the co-construction of meaning*' are central to the development of attachment security. Sessions are designed to facilitate a co-regulation of affect, i.e. 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 with their child in order that both can gain a better understanding of their child's emotional anxieties. Story Links extends the pioneering work of Bettelheim (1991) who considered that re-storying within the imaginary world was an important way to support emotionally vulnerable children in their search for meaning i.e. a way to make sense of their emotional experiences. Whereas Bettelheim worked just with the child, in the Story Links model this search for meaning through story metaphor is co-constructed by the parent and child with the support of an educational professional.

According to Piaget (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 alternatively 'looking after' but 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.

In Story Links sessions the parent and pupil co-create a story which is then typed-up story and 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 the child and parent of a positive shared educational experience. The intervention is solution-focused and based on the premise that many parents of children with challenging behaviour are not keen to talk about their child's poor behaviour (again!) but just about all of them are keen that their child should read well. As the recent Steer Report, Learning Behaviour, states:

*There 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.*

*Steer 2009:53*

### Defining exclusion

Much has been written about what is meant by exclusion and its more positive converse 'inclusion'. However, there is often disagreement and controversy as to how inclusion should be defined as highlighted by the Report from the Select Committee on SEN (2006) which states that *'There is considerable confusion over the term inclusion with a wide range of meanings applied to the term'*.

While many schools are making efforts to reduce their formal exclusion rates there are still many pupils in these schools who are being internally removed on a regular basis either from the classroom or the playground because of behavioural difficulties. For the purpose of this evaluation, exclusion from school, removal from the classroom and removal from the playground as a consequence of pupils' behaviour are all included in the overarching term 'at risk of exclusion'.

## 1.4 *Structure of the Story Links Sessions*

The Story Links programme runs over 10 weeks and is led by an educational professional who has attended the 3-day training course. The facilitating professional can be a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), SEN support teacher, educational counsellor, learning mentor or inclusion manager. For ease of writing 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 2 x20 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



a social worker engaged in supporting the child 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 programme of 10 sessions.

The main sessions begin with the teacher having 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 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 then 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 it 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 done as 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 and a copy goes to the teaching assistant for work on the two 20 minute reading skills sessions during the week.

See **Teachers TV video clip** ([www.teachers.tv/video/34482](http://www.teachers.tv/video/34482)) in Appendix 1 to view a sample session led by the researcher.



### 2.1 Aims of the Evaluation

This evaluation was conducted following the delivery of the three-day Story Links training to 55 educational professionals supporting vulnerable pupils and the ten-week programme subsequently introduced by them into schools. With a sample of those who been trained, the evaluation sought to assess the impact of the intervention on:

- a) pupils' emotional and social well-being
- b) pupils' behaviour and rates of exclusion (from school, classroom and playground)
- c) the engagement of parents with their child's learning
- d) pupils' reading skills and engagement with learning.

### 2.2 Evaluation design

The evaluation adopted a case study design, with the Story Links programme being the case. Case study was a particularly appropriate design because it enabled an in-depth exploration of the co-construction, by parents and pupils, of stories that relate to the child's emotional world and the impact of the written stories in engaging parents in their child's learning. Case study also has the flexibility to be responsive, which is important with a hard to access and vulnerable target group, and also to monitor changes over time. It can utilize a range of methods, including qualitative and quantitative, and both were used in this case in order to document the complexity of the intervention and evaluate its effects. The exact methods used were as follows:

#### 2.2.1 Quantitative methods

1. Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (behavioural and social skills) completed by classteachers
2. Pre and post assessment of pupils' reading using the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA)(1997)
3. Pre and post exclusion rates from school, classroom and playground
4. Rates of parental attendance at Story Links sessions
5. Likert scaling questionnaires which rated teachers' and parents' views on the impact of the Story Links intervention on:
  - i. pupils' engagement with reading
  - ii. pupils' awareness of their own feelings and the feelings of others
  - iii. pupils' behaviour
  - iv. the home/school relationship
  - v. the overall benefit of the Story Links programme.

6. Likert questionnaire, completed by pupils, rating their enjoyment of the Story Links sessions

### The Goodman's Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

The quantitative Goodman's SDQ behavioural screening questionnaire was used to assess classteachers' perceptions of the pupils' behaviour, emotional and social difficulties pre and post intervention. Both the Boxall Profile (ref) and the Rutter Child Behaviour Checklist (ref) behaviour screening tool were also initially investigated but the Goodman's was chosen as it is quicker to administer than either of these. The Goodman's can be administered in about ten minutes and this was an important factor as it was to be completed by classteachers who often have difficulty finding time for an extended meeting during the school day. Additionally, the Goodman's is a well-established standardised measure that correlates well with the Rutter behaviour screening tool (Goodman, 1997). An online facility at [www.sdqscore.net](http://www.sdqscore.net) provided by Youth in Mind was used to convert the questionnaire data into final scores for each pupil. A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix 2 and the two individual pupil profiles provide examples of the completed score sheets.

The score for Overall Stress is calculated by summing the scores for Emotional Anxiety + Behavioural Difficulties + Hyperactivity & Attentional Difficulties + Difficulties Getting Along with Other Children.

### Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA)

The second revised version of the NEALE analysis (1997) was chosen as the tool for measuring pupils' pre and post reading skills. This measuring tool has been used for over forty years to monitor literacy in mainstream schools and in 1997 the standardisation was updated by NFER-Nelson. It was also chosen because it provides two parallel forms for assessment which allow a pre and post measure of reading skills of the 10 week intervention.

In analysing the results of the NARA, attention was given to the 68% confidence banding provided alongside the scores in the NARA manual, 1997. This 'confidence band' indicates the range of scores within which the true score is likely to fall.

## 2.2.2 Qualitative methods

1. Pre and post semi-structured interviews with individual pupils, parents/carers, classteachers and Story Links teachers.
2. Post semi-structured interviews with Story Links teacher assistant (TA) and SENCO (when available).
3. Content analysis of parent/pupil stories.
4. Two in-depth pupil profiles.

## Interviews

### *Number and length of interviews*

There were at least seven interviews for each pupil/parent set, i.e. pre and post interviews with pupil, parent and teachers or TA, giving a total of over eighty interviews. Parent, teacher and TA interviews generally lasted at least 20 minutes. Pupil interviews were also about 20 minutes, though these included administration of the NARA reading assessment.

### *Formulation of Interview Questions*

The questions used in the individual interviews with parents and pupils are listed in Appendix 4. In framing pupil questions thought was given to using language that would be familiar to the children. The Likert rating scales were also included in the interview questions and provided four options for participants to choose from.

### *Recording and transcription of interviews*

Interviews took place in a quiet room. The interviews were all digitally recorded and a back-up handwritten record was also taken. Transcription of interviews was undertaken by an external agency and exchange of data was via a password-protected internet electronic storage facility. The transcriptions of the audio recordings were then checked for accuracy by the principal researcher.

All interviews were transcribed for the first three pupil sets as this data was used to establish the main thematic headings for the analysis of the set of interviews. For the remaining pupil/parent sets, all parent and Story Links teacher interviews were fully transcribed by the external transcriber, while some of the shorter interviews with pupils and TAs were analysed in audio form and pertinent sections transcribed by the principal researcher.

## 2.2.3 Analysis of data

### *Analysis of interview data*

The qualitative interview data was analysed thematically across the cases using NVivo software and interpretative processing.

The analysis comprised five stages:

- transcriptions from the external agency were checked for accuracy against the audio recordings;
- audio recordings and transcripts were listened to and read several times to provide total familiarity with the data;
- initial themes were highlighted from the interviews from the first three pupil/parent sets (over thirty interviews);
- all interviews were searched for these themes and any others which seemed pertinent in individual cases.
- initial themes were refined and those which prevailed were checked for consistency across the remaining interviews

### Analysis of stories

Between seven and ten stories were generated by each parent/pupil set giving a total of over one hundred stories. These co-created stories were analysed with respect to whether they reflected pupils' behavioural, emotional and social issues as identified by parents and teachers, and their relationships with siblings, with classmates, and with parent/s. Common themes were elicited across the stories.

Parents, Story Links teachers, and the pupils themselves were asked to indicate a story that had particularly engaged the pupil. While all stories were analysed, there was a focus on these selected stories as they had had a particular emotional resonance for participants and hence related to the areas of investigation.

### Individual pupil profiles

Two individual pupil profiles were written drawing on the whole range of quantitative and qualitative data gathered for these two pupils. These were the first two pupil/parent sets to complete the Story Links programme. The analysis and writing of these two in-depth profiles informed the identification of the initial thematic headings for the cross-case qualitative data analysis.

## 2.2.4 Validity

Several approaches to ensuring validity were employed, as outlined below.

### Accuracy and consistency and fairness in data-gathering and reporting

First every effort was made to check the accuracy and meaning of participant's perspectives and where there was discrepancy this has been noted. Drafts of the individual pupil profiles were sent to the relevant Story Links teachers and their views sought on the accuracy of the portrayals.

### Fairness in reporting

Secondly, in selecting and representing participants' perspectives, I tried to be fair, choosing neither over-dramatic quotations to make a point nor those which would represent participants experience unfairly.

### Triangulation

Thirdly, three strategies of triangulation were used in the analysis of the data to enhance its validity: method triangulation, source triangulation and researcher triangulation. The results of the classteachers' SDQ questionnaires were cross-checked with data gained from the semi-structured interviews with pupils, parents, TAs and Story Links teachers (method triangulation). Data from teachers, parents and pupils were compared and contrasted (source triangulation). The principal researcher's interview questions and a sample of her interpretations were checked by an external expert evaluator for undue bias and consistency (researcher triangulation) as outlined in the following section.

### Monitoring subjectivity

Fourthly, particular attention was given to monitoring subjectivity and potential bias. The principal researcher in this evaluation both developed the Story Links model and trained the Story Links teachers. Consequently it was a priority in the methodology to have a mechanism that monitored the influence and subjectivity of the researcher in the data collection and

analysis. For any qualitative researcher, familiarity with or engagement in the field under scrutiny has the ability to either enhance the understanding of the topic under investigation (Simons 2009) or to predispose the researcher to seeking positive results. In conducting this evaluation, I took the following steps to minimise potential bias relating to my position as the person who both developed the model and led the training:

- i) I have aspired to impartiality in the collection and analysis of the data throughout.
- ii) All interviews were audio-digitally recorded and the majority were transcribed by an external agency.
- iii) Data from the interpretation of the qualitative interviews was triangulated with data from the quantitative SDQ data and the Likert rating scaling of parents and teachers views.
- iv) A leading academic in the field of qualitative research and evaluation (Helen Simons, Southampton University) acted as an external expert evaluator both to oversee the design, conduct and analysis of the evaluation and to monitor my subjectivity. This, she did in the following ways:
  - listening to the audio recording of sample initial interviews to monitor the impartiality of the questioning of the principal researcher;
  - conducting a thematic analysis of all the data (qualitative data, quantitative data and stories) for two pupil/parent sets and then comparing interpretative results with those of the principal researcher;
  - reading through the final report to ensure that the written analysis and conclusions were appropriately drawn from the data.

It is also important to note the positive benefits of having a researcher with extensive experience of working with vulnerable pupils and also a deep knowledge of the programme under investigation. In this case my intimate knowledge of Story Links meant that teachers were keen to discuss what can be quite challenging work with parents and vulnerable pupils. My experience of working with parents and pupils with BESDs also helped me to formulate appropriate research questions and to engage empathically with the pupils and parents, some of whom can easily feel uncomfortable in a formal educational environment.

### 2.2.5 Ethics

The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the professional ethics of the British Educational Research Association (BERA). Schools were informed that researchers would adhere to these codes of ethics and follow the specific principles of procedures noted below in relation to confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent and publication.

#### Ethical principles of procedure

The senior management teams at the seven schools participating in the evaluation were sent a letter with an outline of the Story Links programme; the focus of the evaluation and implications for schools; and the code of ethics and confidentiality (see Appendix 3).

Parents' permission was sought and given for the use of data relating to themselves and their children at the outset. Parents were informed that they and their children could withdraw from the evaluation at any time and this decision would be respected. It would not affect the completion of delivery of the Story Links programme.

Pupils' permission was sought and given for their stories and comments to be used in *'an experiment to see if this programme is useful for you and your parents, and to help us decide whether it would be useful to set it up for other children.'*

Permission was sought and given by all interviewees to record interviews. They were told that they could request that the recording be stopped at any time and that if they said something that they later wished to have removed, this data would be deleted.

Transcription of interviews was undertaken by an external professional transcriber who signed a statement of confidentiality and an agreement to delete all electronic files once the transcriptions had been delivered. In order to facilitate the exchange of data between the researchers and the external transcriber, an internet storage facility was set up and this was password protected.

To offer some protection of privacy names of all persons interviewed in the evaluation have been changed and schools are not named. In selecting quotations to use in the findings, care was taken to avoid using statements reported by others that might be stigmatising or offensive.

Parents and school professionals were informed of these procedures and the purpose of the evaluation before the initial interviews and reminded of them at the end.

### 2.2.6 Presentation of findings

The findings are reported in a theme-based narrative form. Emphasis has been given to allowing parents, professionals and pupils to speak for themselves about their experience of the Story Links intervention. Illustrative quotations from participants are preceded by a summary of the key issues identified in the interview analysis.

In reporting the findings, sometimes only one or two quotations are given to support a point although there are more in the database. This method is used for ease of reporting and readability. In instances when one person said something particularly significant, this has been included and the uniqueness of the response indicated.

## 2.3 The target group

Pupils were selected for inclusion in the evaluation on two criteria:

- they were at risk of exclusion due to behavioural, emotional or social difficulties (BESDs)
- and at least one year behind the reading age (for accuracy and/or comprehension) of their peers.

The first 12 pupil/parents sets to complete the ten-week programme were selected for the evaluation. These were drawn from seven schools and involved ten Story Links teachers. Another two parent/pupil sets were initially 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 parent was unable to maintain regular attendance.

The 12 sets of parents consisted of 10 mothers, one couple (mother and father) and one female foster carer. Four of the pupils had at least one biological parent who was illiterate. Of the parents who attended sessions, two of the parents were illiterate and a further two described themselves as 'dyslexic'<sup>2</sup>.

### **2.3.1 Gender, age and special needs of the pupils**

The pupil group consisted of nine boys and three girls between 7 and 10 years of age and all were on the SEN register for BESDs and poor literacy. All, except two, had a history of being excluded from a mainstream school or withdrawn from the classroom because of challenging behaviour. Of the two pupils who had not been excluded from school or the classroom, one self-harmed and would self-exclude when she was upset and the other was a Looked After Child for whom the main concern was his considerable attention difficulties in the classroom. Eight out of the twelve of the pupils scored below the baseline of 6.01 years on the NARA (Neale Analysis of Reading Assessment) for both accuracy and comprehension at the start of the intervention.

Two pupils were at a special school having been previously excluded from mainstream. Both had a dual diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) named on their statement of special needs. Consideration was given as to the appropriateness of including these pupils given their autistic tendencies. However, the classteacher, who taught both of these pupils, and their parents thought their issues related more to the ADHD aspect of their diagnosis than their autistic tendencies. It was therefore decided to include them in the target group.

### **2.3.2 Family context & ethnic background**

Only a third of the pupils lived with both their biological parents; five lived with a single mother, two pupils had a step-father; and one pupil was in long-term foster care. All pupils in the study were white apart from one who was of mixed English/African heritage and in foster care with a white family.

### **2.3.3 Family literacy and behavioural difficulties**

One-third of the pupils' fathers were illiterate and one of the step-fathers could not read English. One mother was illiterate and another had very poor literacy. In four of the families the pupil had older siblings with literacy difficulties. As well as family patterns of literacy there were some family patterns regarding behavioural difficulties and in discussing their child's issues several parents mentioned the behavioural difficulties of siblings.

### **2.3.4 A vulnerable target group with low self-esteem**

It is clear from the above that the pupil target group was highly individualistic and represents some of the most vulnerable pupils in our schools. The majority of the group not only displayed challenging behaviours and extreme emotional anxiety but were also failing to progress with

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1. Dyslexia is referred to in inverted commas as, while it is a word in common use, there is doubt amongst many researchers (Elliot & Gibbs 2008) in the field of reading development as to whether it is a meaningful term. In this paper the generic terms of 'poor literacy' or 'reading difficulties' are used.



learning in the basic area of literacy. Pupil's low self-esteem was identified by both parents and teachers as one of the major factors impeding their learning. The following comments were typical of the group:

*He's got really low self-esteem – that's his biggest problem... he doesn't even bother trying, he just says the 'I can't's'.*

*John's classteacher*

*'He still has little confidence... if there's something that he's got to try and do himself... he does struggle quite hard with that.'*

*Pete's Mum*

### 2.3.5 Pupils' presenting behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESDs)

As mentioned above all the pupils in the programme were on the SEN register for BESDs and all but two had recently been excluded from the classroom, playground or the school because of challenging behaviour. Of the two who had not, one would self-exclude when she was upset at home and the other was a Looked After Child (LAC) whose main difficulty was inattention in the classroom.

The majority of the pupil group presented 'acting out' behaviours although some also presented concerning 'acting in' behaviours.

'Acting out' behaviours included:

- **Irritating and seeking attention from other children** including fiddling, poking and throwing things at other children.
- **Disrupting the learning of peers** including constantly calling out, whistling, singing, loud wailing in the classroom.
- **Aggression towards peers** including frequent fights in the playground, attacking other children and needing to be restrained.
- **Aggression towards adults** including shouting and swearing.
- **Temper outbursts** sometimes requiring restraint.
- **General non-compliance:** such as refusing to work in classroom, running out of school, spoiling printed books.

'Acting in' behaviours exhibited by four of the pupils included:

- **Self-harming** including pulling out own hair resulting in partial baldness (2 pupils), scratching face/arms (1 pupil), banging head on hard objects and threatening to jump off high places to kill himself (1 pupil).
- **Acute emotional distress** including crying, hiding under tables or in cupboards.
- **School phobia** (1 pupil).

The BESDs of the pupils created particular issues for the teachers and the schools as these teachers explain:

*Just about every teacher that's taught him has said that for whatever reason they've found him one of the hardest to deal with.*

*Ed's SENCO*



*He's very disruptive of other people's learning and takes very little responsibility for his actions...a complete nightmare [in the playground], lots of fights, lots of falling out which often leads then to him coming in really angry off the playground into starting lessons.*

*John's classteacher*

Many of the parents also confessed that they often found their children's behaviour *'hard work'*: *'I do find it very hard. I find him a 24/7 child, yeah, definitely.'* (Pete's Mum); *'His behaviour is very collapsing, it's either collapsing or aggressive'* (Mark's Mum)

(See table in Appendix 6: for details of individual pupils' presenting issues and family contexts.)

### **2.3.6 Parental attendance**

All parents of the pupil target group attended at least seven of the ten sessions; four attended all and four only missed one. Medical appointments or bad weather were the reasons given for most of the missing sessions. Given that many of these parents had not had regular or positive contact with the school in the past, this level of attendance was remarkably good. (See para 4.4.1 for more details on attendance)

## Chapter 3. Presentation of Findings: Two Pupil Profiles

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### 3.1 Individual Pupil Profile A: John

#### 3.1.1 Summary

John was a nine year old living with his mother who was disabled and referred to John as her carer. He was often sent home at lunchtime because of his aggressive behaviour in the playground and challenging behaviours in the classroom. He was a non-reader and rarely focused on educational tasks. Contrary to expectation, during the Story Links intervention his mother began to engage with the school in a positive manner and also started to hear John read at home.

#### 3.1.2 Background and presenting issues

John attended a mainstream school and was on the SEN register at School Action Plus for both BESDs and literacy difficulties. His reading age was less than 6.01 years (NARA) at the start of the Story links intervention and he was identified by the school as being at high risk of exclusion because of his aggressive behaviour.

His classteacher described him as *'very disruptive of other people's learning'* in the classroom and said that he did not have any close friends in the class. When the school was asked to name a child at risk of exclusion John's name immediately came up. His main behavioural issues were in the playground where his classteacher described him as *'a complete nightmare'*, There were *'lots of fights, lots of falling out'* which often led *'to him coming in really angry from the playground at the start of lessons.'* In fact John had been sent home at lunch time for the previous half-term because of his aggressive behaviour in the playground. He had attended a nurture group four days a week for the eighteen months prior to the intervention as the school felt that that his behavioural issues had to be addressed *'before they could tackle his learning difficulties.'*

John's parents were separated and he lived alone with his mother. His father was illiterate and his mother described herself as 'dyslexic'. He had a teenage brother and sister neither of whom lived at home: his sister had been diagnosed with ADHD and lived in sheltered housing and his older brother had behavioural difficulties. John visited his father at weekends or in the holidays. Mum spent quite a lot of time looking after her dogs and horses as well as doing charity work.

In her initial interview John's mother said that John would *'quite happily trundle off and cook dinner and do the washing and... anything else that he felt was needed to be done'*. However, she added that he also had *'a very short temper and he will retaliate...he can go too far and then it turns into war'* but that despite this *"no matter what frame of mind he's in he would always look after me."* These two aspects of John, the young conscientious carer and the rebellious 'difficult' boy were summed up in his mother's statement: *'when he's focused he's fantastic- he can do anything- but the minute he's not, he's gone off into mischief and whatever John wants to do in John's world.'*

#### 3.1.3 John's and his mother's attitude to school

John said that he didn't like being at school...

*because I like being, spending time with my mum and my dad. When we come to school they always go out and they don't come back and I have to go up the play centre and then I only get to spend time [with them] at night time.*

The only thing he did like about school was when he could play football at lunchtime. He said that his behaviour in school was *'not very good'*. Literacy was his least favourite thing to do in school and he thought his reading was *'not very good... because I haven't been reading for ages'* either at home or school. He didn't like to read in school *'because I don't know what I'm doing'*.

Mum said that she hardly ever came into the school because of her disability, which meant she had to use a walking frame, and, given that they lived very close to the school, John could walk home on his own. John's classteacher said that she had seen Mum *'rarely, only 3 or 4 times over the year'* and the Story Links teacher indicated that *'the school thought Mum would be very hard to engage'*. John himself had worried whether his Mum would be able to make it and had suggested that his dad might come if she couldn't, adding that *'my dad hasn't ever been to my school.'*

In fact, Mum readily agreed to the intervention and punctually attended every one of the ten sessions. The Story Links teacher reported that she proved to be *'very eager, surprisingly eager... the school is quite shocked that she's actually turning up religiously and is very committed.'*

### 3.1.4 The story character as a projection of the child's behavioural and emotional issues

Here is a story co-created in the third Story Links session that seems to reflect something of John's emotional issues related to being a young carer and also his experience of having his mother come into school to support him:

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.



John himself provided the first line of the story: *'Bo the Elephant was stropky and used to cry because he had to find food on his own'*. Like Bo, John could also be stropky and, as his teacher reported, he seemed to be continuously on the move in the classroom:

*He fiddles, he pokes, he's up and about... he'll take someone else's seat or he will take someone else's ruler or he'll say, 'I need to go and sharpen my pencil' via everybody else in the classroom. It's little stuff but constant...he's always wanting attention from other people and unfortunately, by doing that he irritates them.*

The Story Links teacher was surprised by John's wanting to take the lead with the stories as she had planned to do this, possibly with input from mother as suggested in the training. It seemed that John was unconsciously taking the adult position here as he often did at home in his role as a young carer. However, just as Bo is in need of some looking after and is very happy when his 'keeper' arrives with a box of sticky buns that they can 'eat together', John seemed very happy that his mother turned up weekly for the sessions –contrary to his negative expectations shared in the initial interview. Despite his poor attention and behaviour in the classroom, John's Story Links teacher reported that in the Story Links sessions he worked *'perfectly...his behaviour has been never a problem, he's really enjoyed it.'* Just as Bo the elephant was happy when his keeper arrived with his favourite food, likewise it seems that John didn't have to *'get stroppy'* in the Story Links sessions but could experience being nurtured through the activity of sharing stories with his mother. It was clear that Mum had also enjoyed sharing the 'feast' of story-making describing it as *'fantastic'* and *'nice to look forward to'*.

### 3.1.5 The use of story to reflect on behaviour patterns

Reflecting on the overall themes in the stories the Story Links teacher pointed out that six out of the nine stories created involved *'a main character and friend'* who were *'good together and were bad together.'* Here is another story to illustrate:

#### George the Goat

George the Goat had a friend called Harry. They got on well. They ate grass together, they ran around together and they got into trouble together.

They used to eat things that they shouldn't eat - like washing. Eating washing made them feel ill. They would get tummy ache. This made them very sad.

They had to go to the vet, but they didn't want to go.

The man came in a lorry to take them to the vet. They put their head down and their horns out and chased him away. "We will stop eating washing" they said. This was hard because they had got so used to eating washing. It was hard because people still put their washing out.

They just couldn't stop themselves eating other people's washing. This made them sad as well. What could they do?

The Story Links teacher thought this story was particular pertinent for John as *'it was evidence that it was very hard for him to stop doing naughty things because he just couldn't stop'*

*himself... I think it's about him just not being able to behave, just always getting into trouble, always ending up being naughty.'*

It was John who completed the story line with *'They just couldn't stop themselves eating other people's washing'* and the Story Links teacher had added *'This made them sad as well. What could they do?'* In this way the teacher was able to reflect the feeling that behaving badly can bring up feelings of regret while provided a *'resting place'* for the story which included the possibility that there might be another way to do things.

### 3.1.6 John's engagement with the story metaphor and his emotional literacy

According to the Story Links teacher, John's Mum did not really reflect on the stories or contribute to the initial ideas but rather it was John who *'would come in having thought about it...'*

Mum described how John would talk about the stories between sessions and started to include 'feeling words' as modelled by the Story Links teacher. She thought that the development of this new emotional vocabulary had *'made him more aware that people would have feelings about everything. So that's I think what made the difference to him. It was an enlightenment for him really.'* She gave an example of a time when they were out walking their dogs and John had started to make up a story for the next session:

*He came up with this huge story about the dogs and everything. It must have gone on for about an hour. Most of it did come from him. And then he was like 'and X (Story Links teacher) will say...'. That was really funny because then he was like, 'Oh feelings', and suddenly the dogs that he has he gets really cross with because they bark all the time. He was like 'Oh they've got feelings', and then it took a whole different light on things. And he would be, 'Why are they barking'" rather than, 'Oh, the dogs are barking.' And we went to why and how did the dogs feel? ...they were angry, they were frightened. And he went through all these different feelings that he didn't really come up with before.*

She finished by saying that when he came into the next session the story changed *'because it went round all of us'* but John appeared to have been fine with that. At home John and Mum had worked together sticking photos of their dogs to a copy of the story.

### 3.1.7 A mutually enjoyable activity

It was clear that the sessions had been fun for both parent and pupil. John said that he had 'really enjoyed' the sessions and Mum mentioned several times how much she had 'enjoyed' the sessions and that there had often been laughter as they created the stories. She thought this lightness had also helped John to engage with the reading:

*It's not serious and we all laugh, because X does this, and they say this and we all laugh. So it's not serious, 'you're in trouble, you can't read... [but] 'we need to help you', it's all very light. And that's made a big difference to him.*

### 3.1.8 Impact on John's reading pattern at home

Prior to the intervention, according to Mum, John used to read to her when she was in bed because of her disability.

*Unfortunately I've run out of power at about half past eight or nine o'clock so I'm always in bed by then anyway. So it means that he's allowed to come in my room for 10 minutes and read.*

This was slightly at odds with John's version who said that he *'didn't read at all'* at home before the Story Links programme. He said it was difficult as *'Mum always used to stop reading it because (of) the dogs - we've got two dogs and they always bark and play.'*

However in the post interviews both agreed that he had been reading at home every day while Mum was still up. There had also been a shift in who initiated the reading sessions - from Mum to John.

*We made time to do it. And I said to John 'Right we're going to do the reading now'. But as it got on John would be 'I'm reading no''. So, it wasn't necessarily convenient to do the reading.*

*(Researcher) So, he said when he wanted to read?*

*Yes, rather than me making time for it and prompting him to say 'Right we're doing it now', he would be more interested 'I want to do reading, I want to do reading now.' - which wasn't always the right timing. At the end it was causing a bit of a problem...because he wanted to do things when there was other things on the go and you can't stop cooking and things like that. And he was, especially at breakfast time and dinnertime he was like 'I want to read now.'*

This had resulted in some conflict at times. Mum said that if she couldn't stop to hear him read *'then he'd be cross because he wanted it then.'* She then described an argument in which their last story *'got ripped in half because he wanted to read and I was doing breakfast and dogs and everything else...'* John also mentioned this argument but gave a slightly different perspective saying that it was because she didn't give him *'time to work out difficult words'* and that *'every time I read it and then I just wait, and then she reads it out for me...I want to read it myself.'*

However, Mum thought that the argument was still *'very positive anyway because we'd gone from making time (for reading), to him wanting to do it... "I need to do it, I need to read"...that was really good.'*

Despite the argument John said he would still like to continue reading with his Mum at home because *'I really like to get used to reading. So I have to get a job. And so if I don't read, I can't read, I can't get a job.'*



According to his mother what contributed to this change of heart in John's reading the Story Links stories at home rather than ones he would choose from the library was *'the fact that he's put the input in - that made a big difference.'*

Despite her dyslexia, Mum had clearly made quite an effort to support John during the intervention. She had bought lots of different coloured highlighters and underlined the words that John could read. Then when he said he didn't know the word the next time, she could point out that he had previously read them... At first this worked as John *'really really looked'* at the words but then she found that *'it wasn't quite the right system because he felt that, (once), by the end of the week the lines were putting him off.'*

### 3.1.9 Impact of work completed at home on school's expectations of John

Several weeks into the Story Links intervention Mum sent in some work that she had done with John at home. She had been shocked when she was shown his writing in school and said that it was *'terrible compared with what he writes at home'*. The handwriting in his home note book, according to the Story Links teacher, was *'really good'* compared to the handwriting in his school book which she described as *'dire, almost illegible'*. She said that this

*...kind of blew his cover a little bit... because his teacher didn't really realise that he was capable of that...I think that was possibly part of the catalyst for change; that the class teacher realised he could do much better*

It was evident from his class literacy book that the presentation of his work had improved considerably after bringing in this writing from home. While a lot of the writing in John's home booklet was copying, the following story appeared to be written by John himself:

#### Little Tiger

Little Tiger wouldn't let Mummy Tiger clean his face and wouldn't listen to his bedtime story. One night Mummy Tiger lost her temper and Little Tiger said 'Don't want to go to bed'.

Mummy Tiger roared, 'Alright you can stay up at night then.'

Little Tiger (indecipherable) cook something good, before Mummy Tiger can change her mind. (indecipherable) before Mummy Tiger changes her mind.

It seems that John had instinctively copied the Story Links model of using story as a container for difficult feelings in this writing. The story clearly reflects the relational dynamic between John and his Mum, with the little tiger being difficult, arguing with his Mummy but also doing the household chores.

### 3.1.10 Change of Parent-School Relationship on John

John's Mum described her relationship with the school before the Story Links programme as *'horrible, all the time'* and that *'previously it was when something went wrong...the only*

interaction is “John’s been bad, this has happened”.’ However, she felt that the Story Links programme had turned this around and that the focus on reading rather than on bad behaviour had made a big difference to her contact with the school:

*This has been sort of more positive. Now it’s nice to look forward to coming in, in the afternoon, we all sit down -we talk about bits and pieces, and John glows and picks up his reading and is eager to tell us his story.*

### 3.1.11 Including Dad

John had regular contact with his Dad but as mentioned above Dad had had no contact with the school at all before the Story Links programme. Mum said that Dad’s poor literacy meant that he would struggle to read John’s stories. Consequently John did not read to his dad when he visited him at weekends. Although not directly involved with the programme, John’s Dad was mentioned by John, both at the start and at the end of the intervention, for his reason for wanting to be able to read. Initially John said he would like to get better at reading *‘because it will make me used to reading when my Dad gives me stuff to read.’* In the final interview he referred obliquely to his father’s poor literacy when asked if he thought Story Links would be good for other pupils:

*I think it is. It’s good because you can make your children, if your dad can’t read, and you’re going somewhere, you can at least read it for him. And when you go on holiday you know where you’re going and you can read the map.*

In fact while the Story Links programme was running John’s father did come into school with his mother for the first time for a discussion about his progress.

### 3.1.12 Impact on John’s self-esteem

John’s self-esteem, which his mother related to his attitude to reading, really, really improved through this group. *‘He just seems a lot more confident in himself.’* She described the Story Links sessions as having been ‘fantastic’ but with *‘the reading side being a very small part of it’*. While they had *‘achieved a lot with the reading’* she thought it was his increased self-esteem from the encouragement everyone had given him that had mostly been affected. However she added that his low self-esteem was *‘part and parcel of his reading in the first place.’*

Whereas his classteacher had previously referred to his frequent use of *‘I can’t’* in the classroom, the Story Links teacher said that John had participated fully in the sessions and had willingly read his story to the group each week. She said that when he came into the sessions *‘he would very clearly have the idea... he very much took the responsibility.’* She added that *‘he’s very eager... he always wants to carry on...he obviously loves it, because it’s something he can achieve I suppose.’* She added that because of his engagement with the reading and story-making *‘he got a lot of encouragement and praise from us.’* She had noticed that previously he had found it hard to accept praise but as the sessions progressed *‘he was able to accept that more.’*



### 3.1.13 Impact on John's reading and attitude to learning in school

Prior to the Story Links programme John did not register on the NARA for either accuracy or comprehension giving him a reading age of less than 6.01 years. When tested 12 weeks later after the intervention, he registered on the scale for comprehension with a score of 6.01 years although he continued to score less than 6.01 years for accuracy.

While the NARA indicated only a very minimal increase in his reading skills, all the adults involved and John himself felt that he had started to engage more positively with the activity of reading. The Story Links teacher, although she had previously worked with John in play therapy, had not realised his reading was so poor and had been 'shocked' to discover John could *'just read two letter words'*. She reported that during the sessions John *'became more interested in being able to read, he became much more enthusiastic about wanting to read (the story)...and very pleased that he could read it.'* She felt that sometimes there was an issue of *'stopping Mum expecting too much from him in terms of reading.'* She referred to a *'kind of alphabet chart with pictures'* created at home and the system of highlighting words, mentioned by Mum above, that had got rather complicated.

John himself in his initial interview described himself as 'not very good at reading' saying that this was because he hadn't *'been reading for ages.'* He also said that he felt *'not very happy'* if he had to read in class *'because I don't know what I'm doing.'* However, in his final interview John said that he had 'really liked' the sessions and thought that they were making him *'really good (at) reading now'* but added that he needed 'more of the reading. He thought he had improved because *'when I go wrong they help me and then I get used to it- then, I know.'* He said that he had called several of his characters by the same name 'George' as this was a word that he could now read.

John's classteacher prior to the intervention said that he would *'sit and flick through a book'* but that he was not actually reading it - he was *'just sort of dozing'*. However, after the intervention she said that while John was still quite disruptive in maths he *had 'become a lot better in literacy'*. When she worked with his small reading group, she said that he would now say *'I'd like to read.'* However, she did add that *'within three words he cannot cope'* and as the task was usually one relating to comprehension she would then offer to *'read it out for him'*.

His classteacher also brought along some samples of unaided writing completed in class by John during the Story Links intervention, saying *'he is coming in to work, [muffled] and this [unaided writing sample] is much, much better'*. The samples indicated that he had increased the amount he was writing and had taken on board teaching points on punctuation.

The TA reported that in the two 20 min sessions during the week where there was time for John to *'have a go'* at unknown words John had *'loved'* reading the stories. She said he had still used a lot of 'guesswork' but that 'occasionally he self-corrected himself on certain words and he knew the key words.

### 3.1.14 Mum's confidence to support John's reading skills

Mum was most concerned that Story Links had ended as it seemed to have helped John so much. She stressed that although she was keen to help John with his reading she was worried that she didn't have the proper skills saying that her older children learnt with Letter Land but that she didn't understand the phonetic approach used with John. She also said that as *'he was having lots of help at school there was never any reason for me to think that he wasn't getting*

anywhere, 'and that she found it *'really hard to understand that we've got to this year in his schooling, before we've flagged up a huge problem.'* She was very concerned that as his literacy difficulties had now been clearly identified that proper support should be put in place.

### 3.1.15 Impact on John's behaviour in school

According to his TA, John's behaviour in both the main Story Links sessions and in the two weekly reading sessions was 'perfect'. She thought one story they had created about a horse that had to learn to stop kicking younger horses had particularly helped John to think about his behaviour. This was in significant contrast to his general behaviour in and around school which was still very poor. He had commented on this in his initial interview saying it was *'not very good'* because he *'messed around'* and in the final interview he said it was *'the same really'...* His TA commented that thought the main benefit of the Story Links programme for John had been *'the caring side of it... to have some quality time; seeing him with his mum that she had to listen to him maybe.'*

Both the classteacher and the TA reported that John continued to be excessively attention-seeking in class. However, the Goodman's SDQ completed by his classteacher, shown in figure 1, indicated a reduction in his hyperactivity and attentional difficulties as well as his difficulties in getting along with other children over the course of the Story Links programme.

Goodman's SDQ results for John (completed by classteacher)	Pre-intervention		Post-intervention	
	Score	Banding	Score	Banding
Overall stress	25	Very high	18	High
Emotional distress	4	Slightly raised	2	Close to average
Behavioural difficulties	7	Very high	6	Very high
Hyperactivity and attentional difficulties	10	Very high	8	High
Difficulties getting along with other children	4	Slightly raised	2	Close to average
Impact of any difficulties on the child's learning environment	3	Very high	3	Very high

**Figure 1: Goodman's SDQ results for John (pupil profile A)**

John had been excluded from the playground about half the time during the 10 week intervention whereas prior to the Story Links programme he had been sent home every day at lunchtime. However the SDQ scores also indicate that the impact of John's difficulties on his learning environment continued to be a cause for concern.

### Too close to home- the behaviour reward system

The target set for John in the behaviour reward part of the programme, *'not to distract others and for him to make his teacher happy, or to make the adult that he was working with happy.'* did not really work. Expecting John to make the adult 'happy' appears to have paralleled the situation at home where John, as a young carer was required to look after his mother needs a lot of the time. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the classteacher reported that this behaviour reward programme *'didn't make any difference'*. The Story Links teacher thought she may not have explained too well, but John had not really understood the target set by his classteacher as she overheard him say: *'Oh I can get four warnings but I can still make her happy.'* The Story Links teacher said she intended to set the behaviour chart up clearly at the beginning when using Story Links with other pupils in future.

While the Goodman's SDQ, in figure 1, showed that John's Overall Stress level (see 2.2.1 for how this is calculated) was significantly reduced during the period of the intervention both the SDQ and the interview data indicated that the reason for this was a reduction in John's emotional distress and attentional difficulties rather than a significant improvement in his behaviour.

#### 3.1.16 The TA as a secure attachment figure for John

John had developed a good relationship with the Story Links TA and worked well in the 2 x 20 min sessions with her during the week. The Story Links teacher said the TA had *'felt very responsible and had a very close relationship with this piece of work'*. This had clearly been communicated to John who said that *'Aaron's Mum (TA) probably wants to do more because she likes my book'*. The TA had enjoyed the sessions and said that there had never been any problems in the 1:1 sessions with John; 'he had always been very happy to come out and read to her; he had worked very well; and actually 'loves it'. She thought that it had given him a space where he was *'not under pressure with other people watching'*. It seems that John had formed a positive attachment relationship (Bomber, 2008) with Aaron's Mum. However, this had sometimes led to problems when he was in a teaching group led by Aaron's Mum when he would often compete for her undivided attention.

#### 3.1.17 Conclusion

From the evidence in this profile of John it seems that the emotional containment provided by the Story Links sessions had provided a positive learning environment for both John and his mother who started to hear her son read regularly at home. The stories had clearly engaged and reflected John's internal emotional world and he became very keen to read them as the programme progressed. Overall, John's mother had found the sessions very beneficial, had attended well and thought her relationship with the school had dramatically improved. However, she was concerned about the programme finishing and what future support for her son's reading would be put in place.

While John's father was not actively involved in the Story Links programme, he was a key factor in motivating John to improve his reading. The Story Links programme appeared to have also supported the development of a secure attachment relationship between John and his TA.

While both the Goodman's SDQ and the interview data indicated that there had been a significant reduction in John's overall emotional stress levels, there remained serious concerns from his classteacher about his general behaviour in school.

While John's reading score on the NARA showed only a minimal improvement in comprehension over the 12 weeks and he continued to score well below his peers, his self-esteem and confidence as a reader showed a marked improvement as did his attitude to learning in literacy lessons.

## 3.2 *Individual Pupil Profile B: Aaron*

### *Summary*

Aaron was a nine-year old boy with a diagnosis of both ADHD and ASC who had recently transferred to a special school (MLD). He had significant behaviour difficulties and was a non-reader. During the Story Links programme his reading and behaviour improved significantly and both his parents became more involved in his learning.

The Story Links programme was delivered by a SEN support teacher who had spent some time covering Aaron's class the previous term.

### 3.2.1 **Background and Presenting Issues**

Nine year-old Aaron had recently transferred from mainstream to a special school for pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) because of his severe behavioural difficulties and his lack of progress in learning. The Story Links intervention began in the third term of his placement at the special school. In his initial interview Aaron presented as rather immature for his age and easily distracted by sounds and objects in the room. His reading age was less than 6.01 years on the NARA prior to the start of the Story Links programme.

After frequent exclusion from his previous mainstream school for behaviour difficulties, Aaron eventually received a Statement of Special Educational Need when he was seven years old with both ADHD and ASD named as his categories of need. However, his mother said that *'in practice it's more attention deficit'*. His classteacher seemed to agree saying, *'it's his behavioural side of things... socially he can get on with other children, he's quite happy to approach other people, speak to other people, chat to them.'* Since being at the special school, his class placement had alternated between ASD and non-ASD groups. The Story Links teacher agreed with his classteacher that his main problems were more related to behaviour than typical autistic type behaviour and it is for this reason that Aaron was included in the cohort for evaluation. There was some initial discussion as to whether Aaron's autistic tendencies might affect his ability to work with story metaphor. However, as will be seen below, this did not prove to be the case.

### **Family context and home learning prior to Story Links**

Aaron's parents had been separated for about four years and he lived mainly with his mother and older sister, although he did stay with his dad a couple of nights in the week and alternate weekends. His Mother mentioned in the course of the programme that the parental separation may have had an impact on Aaron. His mother was the main point of contact with the school and it was she who agreed to attend the Story Links sessions. Before the intervention the classteacher described her relationship with Aaron's parents as 'mainly good' and thought that they probably supported him with reading at home but said this was primarily based on the 'home-school' book as his mother rarely came into school and she had never met his father. However, the classteacher's view on how much reading happened at home contrasted with what Aaron's mother said - she described herself as 'a *'bit naughty'* in that she rarely heard

Aaron read.<sup>3</sup> She said it would be *'less than once a week – if that'* and added that *'the last thing you both want to do [when you get home] is just to sit down and do something that he feels is like school.'* Mum didn't know what Aaron did when he was at his dad's but Aaron himself said that he didn't read to Dad when he stayed there.

Mother was prepared to do *'anything that I think is going to help'* though she thought that there *'will be times when he [Aaron] will find it quite difficult, I'm sure and it will all get too much.'* She said she would make a *'more concerted effort'* to hear Aaron read and speak to Aaron's dad and ask him to also *'make an effort'*.

### Exclusion history and behavioural difficulties

From the moment he started, school had been difficult, according to his mother. He had been excluded from his previous mainstream school more times than she could remember. *'It was quite frustrating to be honest -it was every day getting phone calls... to say he had done this and done that and could I come and pick him up.'*

Since attending the special school he had not been excluded though on occasions he had had to be restrained and removed from the classroom to the 'on-call'<sup>4</sup> room. In the pre-intervention meeting with his classteacher she described how if someone hurt him he would 'hit back harder', that he easily got frustrated and would often 'explode'. His mother, his class teachers and the Story Links teacher all thought that Aaron's anger outbursts seemed to relate to a need to be in control. When he couldn't control the TV channels at home his mother said *'he'll storm upstairs and bang a few doors.'*

Many of his behavioural difficulties, according to his mother, were because of his low self-esteem. He needed help to *'unlock whatever it is in his head'* that stopped him having a go at learning tasks. She spoke of him *'automatically putting this big barrier up, this huge mountain to climb'* and noticed that if he didn't get things quite right he got very embarrassed:

*And then through the embarrassment he gets cross because he thinks everyone's laughing and they think he's stupid. And then he'll go that little bit too far and you just can't quite bring him back again and then he'll realise he's done something wrong but he's too cross and angry to bring himself back.*

### 3.2.2 Using the Stories to address emotional, social and behavioural issues

Nine stories were co-created in the sessions and Dino the Dragon was the central character in all of them. The other characters included a mother dragon, Mr Wing a teacher at dragon school and some other young dragons. All the stories were powerful and clearly explored issues that were pertinent for Aaron such as feeling angry, being worried or fed-up and the difficulties of sharing with others. One story, Fireballs, was written following the mother's observation that Aaron had difficulty with turn-taking and sharing with his sister at home. This story was mentioned by the parent, the TA and the Story Links teacher as particularly significant in reflecting Aaron's emotional and behavioural issues. Here is the whole story:

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<sup>3</sup> (The term 'naughty' was also used by a couple of other parents in the pilot study to describe themselves in relation to not hearing their child read).

<sup>4</sup> A supervised internal room to which pupils are removed when they cannot manage in the main classroom

## Fireballs

**(Story Links teacher)** 'Your turn, Dino,' said Dino's brother, Peter.

So Dino carefully made a smoke ring and tried to blow it so it would land on Peter's tail.

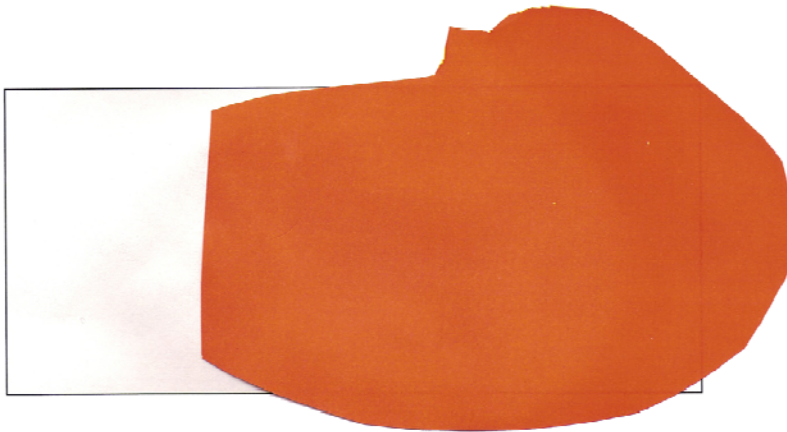
'Yes... no... oh, so close... oh, I just missed!'

Peter and Dino laughed happily. Then Peter got ready to make his smoke ring.

'No hang on, Peter!' said Dino. 'Let me just try one more time.'

'No, Dino, it's my turn!' Peter stood up and gave Dino a shove. Suddenly Dino's fire box was red hot.

**(Aaron)** Red hot! Dino blew a big fire ball at Peter. Then Peter blew a big, little fire ball at Dino. They kept on doing it until they blew the whole house up.



**(Mother)** Their mother came home from the shops.

'What on earth has been going on? What have you done to my lovely home?'

**(TA)** Dino's fire box was not red hot any more. He was worried and upset. He and Peter looked at their mother and both said, 'We're really sorry. We had an argument. A big argument.'

**(Story Links teacher)** Dino looked at his mother. She still looked angry. He looked at Peter. He didn't look angry anymore. Dino thought hard. What should he do next?

**(Aaron)** Then their mother told Dino to go and do his flying lessons. Then their mother said to Peter, 'Go with Dino to flying lessons.'



**(Mother)** Their mother hoped they would work together nicely. While they were away she got in touch with the builders and asked them to fix the house.

**(TA)** After lessons they said, 'Let's get a nice present for Mother to show her how sorry we are.'

So they bought her a lovely big box of chocolates. Then they flew carefully home, talking all the way.

**(Story Links teacher)** Dino said, 'I wish I hadn't blown that fireball at you.'

Peter said, 'And I wish I hadn't blown that fireball at you.'

Then Dino said, 'Let's promise to try not to blow a fireball again, even if we get really cross.'

So they slapped their wings together and smiled at each other. Then they flew home together.

In this story the Story Links teacher provided an engaging and pertinent opening to the story that refers to the issue brought up by Aaron's mother. By making the other dragon a brother rather than a sister she avoids presenting a scene too close to Aaron's actual experience. Her contribution *'Dino thought hard. What should he do next?'* provides a clear 'bridge to change'<sup>5</sup> and her final statement that begins *'Let's promise to try not to blow a fireball again...'* brings the short story to a suitable resolution or 'resting place'.

The Story Links teacher made some insightful reflections on the significance of this particular story for Aaron:

*'It was really interesting that he had the younger sibling also firing a fireball back and the pair of them blowing the whole house up. I thought that really expressed what Aaron feels when he loses his temper... that's what makes it so destructive because he kind of feels that 'oh look I've done it now'... and he can't then bring himself back because he feels like he's blown it at that moment... I was really pleased that he was able to express that idea of the effect of a temper tantrum...because at the beginning of, in the first sessions I don't think he had that understanding of the consequences of the temper... and then the adults within the group were able to kind of let him see that actually in real life someone loses their temper and it might have negative repercussions but actually life does go on and you can put things right.'*

She pointed out that that many of the stories had similar *'interesting little moments'* that showed that *'you could put stuff right.'* The issue of needing to be in control in the classroom

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<sup>5</sup> A 'bridge to change' is discussed in the training as a point in the story where the character has the opportunity to change their habitual way of doing things

had been addressed by Mr Wing who was trying -at times with difficulty- to teach Dino to fly in a couple of the stories. All the stories developed a particular dilemma before some sort of resolution was reached. She felt that using 'thinking hard' as a 'bridge to change' had both encouraged and reflected Aaron's increasing capacity to think things through.

Aaron had refused to do pictures for his previous stories but for this one he did a graphic illustration of a fireball using a computer graphics programme. After this week he continued to produce a computer generated picture for the stories.

### 3.2.3 Parent's reflection on the use of story metaphor to address emotional and behavioural issues

His mother thought that the stories had helped Aaron to understand some of his emotional issues and that the use of story characters meant the stories were '*not obviously directed at him*'. In discussing the stories' themes she said that '*all of it rang true, certain little lessons in there he understood really, which I think is good.*'

The Story Links teacher reported that initially she had taken the lead in relating the story theme to Aaron's issues as for the mother '*it was clearly quite a new thing*'. However after a few sessions this appeared to have changed:

*There came a point when she suddenly saw what was happening, and... she told me then one day 'Oh, it would be really good if the stories were about...' and she gave me three suggestions of issues at home that she wanted to address. And...I felt that she completely understood the idea that within the story you could have the character having an issue or doing something that would be unsafe.'*

One of these issues was the sibling rivalry addressed in the Fireballs story above.

### 3.2.4 Impact on pupil's learning and engagement in the sessions

Pre the Story Links programme, Aaron had said that he didn't enjoy reading and that English was his least favourite subject. However, post Story Links programme he described reading as something he 'really enjoyed' and that he had found the sessions '*good because...I like doing the stories.*' In his post-intervention interview Aaron appeared more focused than in the initial interview and used the word 'good' six times to describe the Story Links sessions.

The Story Links teacher reported that Aaron's behaviour had been 'impeccable' in the sessions 'even when he has arrived upset/ angry about something'. Initially he would sit 'really hunched down... that thing he does when he's a bit frightened, and you know, at the risk of expressing himself or having a go' and that at first 'it took a while for him to say anything at all'. However this gradually changed until

*By the last sessions he was happily engaged and relaxed, and smiling and laughing about the plans we were making. As soon as it was his turn, then he was in there with something and each time it was a slightly bigger bit of the story.*

*Story Links teacher*



This increase in confidence was also commented on by his mother: *'You know initially he was like "Oh I don't know", but then he actually started coming up with his own ideas of how he wanted the story to go.'*

The TA who worked with Aaron during the week reported that he had worked well on his reading and that he would *'have a go at every word even if he's not sure.'* This was clearly a shift from his previous attitude to reading. She said Aaron had enjoyed the stories, had some really good ideas and *'loved the fact that his mother was here.'* She thought it had *'made him feel a bit special really.'*

The Story Links teacher said Aaron *had 'willingly read the story to us each week, virtually independently, just needing a couple of verbal prompts and reassurance'* and that *'it wasn't remembering them, he actually read them.'* She had initially supported Aaron with his reading in the sessions but after a few weeks his mother took over after *'a little encouragement beforehand.'*

### 3.2.5 Reading and behaviour at home

Aaron's mother said she had managed to hear Aaron read the stories twice a week apart from one week when she only heard him once. She described his improvement as *'phenomenal really, even though I know on your scale it wasn't particularly high.'* Before the intervention, she said, he would *'read'* by memorising stories and got very frustrated when asked to sound out words. However, this had clearly changed:

*It's amazing; he's really, sounding out quite big words sometimes and just really having the confidence to have a go and enjoying the story. He loves stories, but before he wanted you to read them to him whereas now he's quite happy to try to read it to you.'*

Mother

She thought the Story Links work had *'given him the confidence to have a go and try rather than just looking at it and thinking that's too difficult.'* His attitude to home-work had also *'definitely'* changed *'because before he didn't really want to do it and now he's willing to do spellings - and you know he's willing to read a book.'*

In relation to his behaviour at home mother said that while *'he still has his moments'* his behaviour was *'better than it was'*. She thought he was *'maturing'*, seemed *'calmer generally at home'* and *'a little bit more content.'*

### 3.2.6 Including Dad

A particularly interesting aspect of the work with Aaron was how a copy of the story began to go to Aaron's father. As mentioned above Aaron did not read to his dad prior to the Story Links programme. However, Aaron had started to take the story to his Dad's at the weekend so the Story Links teacher started to send two copies home, one for each of the parents. The Story Links teacher then received a message *'via mother'* from Aaron's dad that *'he was really pleased about it and was glad that we were doing it.'* In the post-intervention interview mother talked at some length about how Dad had heard Aaron read the Story Links story twice a week and that it had given them something to do together apart from playing on the X-box. Mother thought Aaron's Dad had *'quite enjoyed some of the stories that he came up with'* and that reading with Aaron *'meant that he (Dad) could feel a bit more included.'* The story appeared to have been

something of a link between the two estranged parents. In addition, soon after the Story Links programme Aaron's dad came along to the school for the first time to attend a social event.

### 3.2.7 Reading and behaviour in the classroom

Before the Story Links intervention Aaron's classteacher said that he would settle at quiet reading time *'at a pinch'* but also talked about how easily he would *'explode'*. As the Story Links intervention went over the summer break, Post intervention, his new classteacher ( there had been a change of teacher for the last few weeks of the programme) reported that, *'we never have any problems with him going to read. He even volunteered in assembly the other day to go up and read in front of assembly.'*

The new classteacher said that Aaron still had definite behavioural issues but thought there had been an improvement over the last few months: *'From what I saw of him last year, he was spending a lot of time sort of outside the class room [in the on-call room], he was struggling more and to be fair to him he's spending a lot more time in the classroom [now]'*.

When Aaron was tested on the Neale Assessment of Reading Analysis (NARA) before the Story Links intervention, he failed to register on the scale giving him a reading age of less than 6.01 years (1<sup>st</sup> percentile) for both accuracy and comprehension. However, when he was tested 4 months later after the Story Links intervention, he registered on the scale with a reading age of 6.03 (1<sup>st</sup> percentile) for accuracy and 6:07 (3<sup>rd</sup> percentile) for comprehension. This indicates that he was starting to develop some basic reading skills.

From the Goodman's SDQ completed by Aaron's class teacher (see figure 2) before and after the intervention it is clear that his overall emotional anxiety was significantly lowered over the period of the Story Links intervention. His concentration had improved and while his behavioural difficulties still remained high, the measure indicates that these were not having such a negative impact in the classroom.

**Figure 2: Goodman's SDQ results for Aaron (pupil profile B)**

Goodman's SDQ results for Aaron (completed by classteacher)	Pre-intervention		Post-intervention	
	Score	Banding	Score	Banding
Overall stress	21	Very high	14	Slightly raised
Emotional distress	4	Slightly raised	0	Close to average
Behavioural difficulties	4	High	4	High
Hyperactivity and attentional difficulties	7	Slightly raised	5	close to average
Difficulties getting along with other children	6	Very high	5	high
Impact of child's difficulties on learning environment	6	Very high	2	High

### 3.2.8 Parental attendance & engagement in a ‘mutually enjoyable’ learning activity

Although the timing of the Story Links session interfered a little with her work day Aaron’s mother attended all but one of the Story Links sessions. She sent a message to say that she had a doctor’s appointment but was keen that the session went ahead as Aaron was *‘enjoying it so much’* and in fact seemed to enjoy it more and more as the weeks passed.

She also said how, despite some initial reservations, she had really enjoyed the sessions:

*‘I loved it actually, I think we all got a lot of enjoyment out of it... Giving our little ideas in and writing it all down. So yeah I thoroughly enjoyed it... initially you feel a little bit self-conscious because you’re new and it’s not something you’re used to but actually as time goes on it’s really enjoyable, really good fun, and you’re there... and seeing him actually get into it, kind of spurs you on I think... And then everyone sort of gets a kick out of it and you can have a bit of a giggle.’*

She appreciated getting to know some of the people working with Aaron and this had made her *‘feel better knowing, putting faces to names.’* Aaron, himself, said that he had really liked having his mother come in and he had also enjoyed reading at home to both his Mum and Dad.

The Story Links teacher reported, *‘it was nice to feel it was a positive experience for mother and Aaron.’*

### 3.2.9 Pupil’s engagement with story metaphor

The Story Links teacher observed that Aaron had been *‘perfectly capable of imagining a story’* despite his ASC diagnosis and admitted that to start with *‘it wasn’t necessarily obvious that he would be capable of it.’* She added that while *‘clearly other children might have a bigger imagination or more vivid kind of imagining’* she didn’t *‘have any worries about doing this again with another child with ASC.’*

### 3.2.10 Concluding remarks

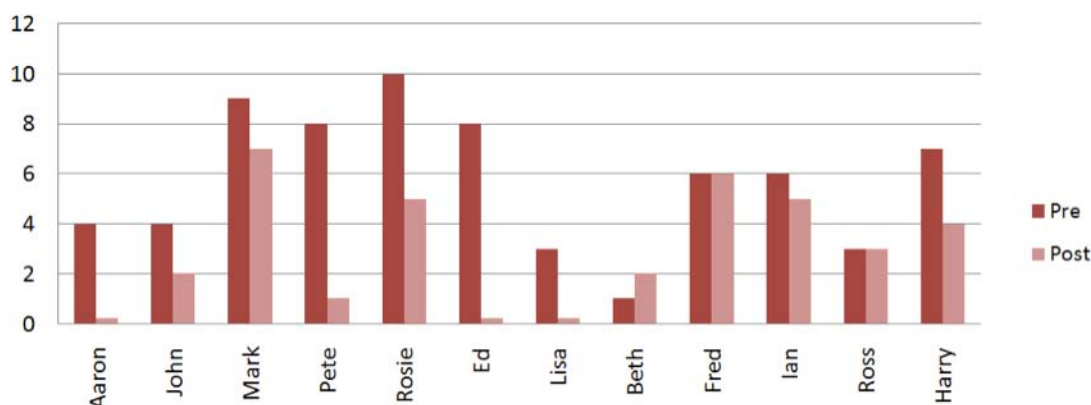
The Story Links intervention had clearly succeeded in engaging Aaron’s parents in his learning. While separated, they had both started to hear their son read on a regular basis and his father had come into school for the first time soon after the Story Links programme ended. Aaron’s attitude to reading in school and his general confidence had also shown a marked improvement as had his behaviour both at home and school.

## 4.1 *Impact on pupils' emotional and social well-being*

### 4.1.1 **Impact on emotional anxiety evident in the main classroom**

The results of the SDQ completed by classteachers pre and post intervention, shown in Figure 3, clearly indicate a significant reduction in pupils' emotional anxiety. Nine of the pupils registered at above average levels of anxiety pre intervention, with seven of these registering at 'very high' levels of emotional anxiety. This correlates with information given by parents and teachers in pre intervention interviews which revealed a high incidence of emotional anxiety in the group. However, there was a significant improvement post-intervention with eight of the nine who were previously above average showing a reduction in emotional anxiety and of the six pupils who scored 'very high' pre intervention, only two remained in this category post intervention.

**Figure 3: SDQ Results for Impact of SLP on Pupils' Emotional Anxiety**



**Key:** 0-3 = Close to average; 4= Slightly raised; 5= High; 6-10 =Very High;

#### **Specific pupil observations**

The pupil, Ed, whose scores indicated **most improvement** for emotional anxiety had four siblings, one of whom was severely disabled, and his mother was also busy running a smallholding. Possibly for this pupil the undivided attention of his mother during the intervention had particularly provided him with a much needed secure emotional base. Certainly his mother had been amazed at the progress he had made, saying *'I really, really didn't expect one hour a day to have this impact on his life and I've got nothing but praise for it.'*

The two pupils who continued to score in the very high bracket post intervention were Fred and Mark. The parents of these pupils, while they had attended well, were also the only ones not to say they had positively enjoyed the Story Links sessions. The case of Fred, whose score did not change and stayed in the 'very high' category, is discussed section 4.1.3 below.

The other pupil, Mark, had the highest reading score at the start of the programme and was the only one of the twelve to say he 'really enjoyed reading' in his pre-interview. He was also the only pupil who was both able and preferred to read on his own at home. This may mean that shared reading time was not the most appropriate means to support parent/child attachment for this child. This pupil had a bald patch on his head at the beginning of the Story Links programme because of pulling out his own hair. While the SDQ indicated only a small reduction in his emotional anxiety, this self-harming habit had stopped during the intervention with the Story Links teacher reporting that *'Mum actually interestingly enough said this week [that] his hair has grown back now and he's not pulling it out any more thank goodness.'* She also added that *'His demeanour and body language generally speaking... show much more confidence but he does sometimes revert to other behaviour [such as] sucking'.*

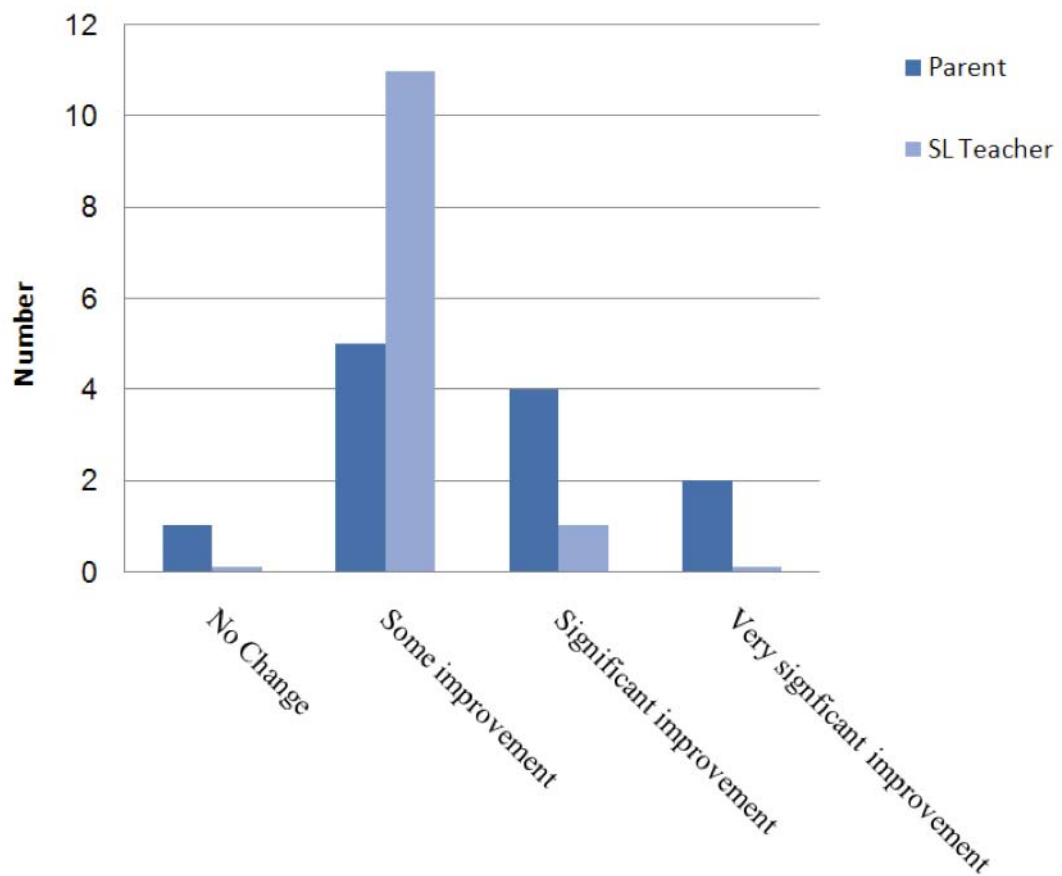
#### **Pupils' ease in Story Links sessions**

All the pupils said they 'really enjoyed' (10/11) or 'enjoyed' (1/11) the sessions and no Story Links teacher or parent reported pupils becoming emotionally distressed in the sessions. One pupil, Harry, became very tearful when his mother failed to turn up without a reason but was fine in the actual sessions. This sense of ease in sessions was significant as the target group was selected because of their emotional and behavioural difficulties.

#### **4.1.2 Impact on pupils' emotional awareness**

As Figure 3 shows, parents and teachers thought there had been an improvement in the emotional awareness of all the pupils apart from one. The mother of this pupil thought her daughter had already been very aware of her feelings and the feelings of others and therefore there had been no change. Parents' ratings show more differentiation than the teachers and this is probably due to parents seeing their children for longer periods and in a range of different situations.

Figure 4: Parents' and Story Links Teachers' Views on Pupils' Emotional Awareness



#### Development of an Emotional Vocabulary

A number of parents commented on how their child's emotional vocabulary had improved. In one case this was attributed to the Story Links teacher's frequent use of words to describe feelings:

*...because the feelings part was added by [Story Links teacher] every time it made him more aware that people would have feelings about everything. So that's I think what made the difference to him. It was an enlightenment for him really.*

*John's Mum*

Following up this observation John's Mum gave an example of how B himself explored a range of feelings when taking their dogs out for a walk (see individual profile A)

In a second case the programme facilitated both awareness of an expression of emotions as Pete's Mum observed:

*It helped him express himself more. And that's really made a difference now because now I can get more things out of him and he's got more aware of his emotions as well.*

When asked in what ways she had noticed this, she replied:

*Just that he didn't realise how his behaviour does affect other children. You know he wasn't that aware really of what he was doing but of course now-I mean he's not fantastic but he's coming more and more aware of it.*

She mentioned how this emerging awareness of feelings had also been evident in Pete's contribution to some of the stories, pointing to a section in their co-created Gordon the Gorilla story. In this story a friend of Gordon's had told him he was upset about something Gordon had done. Pete's Mum had been impressed by what he *'came out with, what Pete actually said'*, which was:

*Gordon said, "I am sorry about that. Why don't you tell me how you felt? It is not good to bottle feelings up. It is better to talk about them.'*

In some cases, the impact of a growing emotional awareness was more subtle or indirect. For example Fred's Mum thought her son had started to talk about his feelings obliquely:

*He'd have one day, it was an average school and one day it was a good school. It would be what he was feeling I think, but he made it out to be the school but I think it was actually aimed at him.*

*Fred's mum*

Fred's Story Links teacher also described Fred as *'really thoughtful and reflective'* in sessions and noticed he had started to use feeling words such as 'angry', 'sad' or 'upset'.

### **Pupils' awareness of their own emotional states**

Only two pupils were really able to verbalise their feelings in the post interview. Harry whose behaviour had improved dramatically (see Harry's story

was able to talk about how he *'got scared easily- that's why I go all panicky'*.

And Ross, who was in foster care, appeared the most able to talk about his feelings. He had this to say about his emotional experience of making up the stories: *'You make your own story up and I think it's quite good and it's exciting, it's all happening and upsetting like when Marvin died and then came to life'*. He was also able to describe his nervousness at the start of the sessions: *'On the first day I was shy...but on the second Friday after that I was OK.'*

This developing emotional awareness was also noted by the adults. For example Ross's TA commented on how Ross appeared to open up emotionally as the weeks progressed:



*I felt that all of a sudden, whereas the story was quite light and fun, all of a sudden it became more dark and I was feeling we were getting more into Ross and what he was thinking deep down...it was like an onion, peeling off the layers and the more he got relaxed with us...I personally felt that he was aiming to start speaking more openly.*

### 4.1.3 Use of the stories to process emotional anxiety

Analysis of the metaphors contained in the sample of pupils' stories showed a high degree of correlation with the pupil's presenting emotional issues. This correlation is particularly evident in the two individual pupil profiles in the following chapter as well as in Fred's story (below) and other excerpts included throughout this chapter.

#### Recurring story themes

- i) **Friendship difficulties** featured as a dominant theme in all of the pupils' stories. The following extracts are typical of the anxieties expressed around relationships with peers in many other stories:

[Bob the rabbit] is sad because he has no friends. He felt lonely and cold. He wanted someone to play with. *(Beth's story)*

Gordon the gorilla was feeling angry because one of the other gorillas had pushed him. *(Pete's story)*

Dino's friends were cross. They said that wasn't the way to play the game. *(Ed's story)*

- ii) **Overcoming adversity.** Overcoming huge obstacles and dealing with peer conflicts were frequently highlighted by parents and Story Links teachers as main story themes:

*All his stories had a huge great challenge or battle or something ghastly that had to be got over... if not an actual battle there was a huge conflict of some sort that only could be resolved by monumental forces unknown to man actually.*

*Mark's SL teacher*

- iii) **Nourishment or lack of it** was another main theme as evident in the following story extracts:

He felt angry because he was hungry. He was hungry because he couldn't go to the shops. He couldn't go to the shops because he had hurt his foot. *(Aaron's story)*

Tea was mashed up crickets. Lily usually ate hers very quickly. Lily was hungry. Lily's Mum knew that she did not really like mashed up crickets. She liked locusts. They roasted three locusts in the oven...Lily put the roasted locusts on the window sill to cool down. Someone crept up to the cave and nicked them. *(Rosie's story)*



Leo needed something to eat but there was nothing.... Leo went off in search of food. He walked and walked but there was nothing. *(Harry's story)*

His brother and sister were in the hut and Alex couldn't get in. He needed a drink but his brother and sister were in the way. *(Beth)*

iii) **Getting lost or abandoned** was also a prominent theme to emerge in the stories

Bess looked in the grass. She hopped to the gate and looked there. She could not find her home. She felt lost. *(Lisa's story)*

Alex the guinea pig was stuck in the park in a storm. Someone picked him up but they didn't know where he lived. *(Beth's story)*

#### **Pupils' projection of their own feelings onto story characters**

Many of the story openings given by the Story Links teacher addressed 'difficult' emotional issues that related to the particular child. The contribution given by the pupil next shows how they would instinctively project their own experiences onto the story character. Here are a few examples:

**SL teacher:** *Alex the guinea pig was very angry and fed up.*

**Beth:** *He couldn't go for a swim in the bath but his brother and sister could.*

(Beth competed with six siblings for attention at home)

**SL teacher:** *Dino the dinosaur was very angry. He sat outside his cave and growled.*

**Ed:** *He wanted to be the King but he wasn't so he killed the King.*

(Ed was often fighting with peers and wanted to be in control)

**SL teacher:** *Ranio the Rhino was very angry*

**John:** *because Fred had run off without him after pushing Ranio into the water hole.*

(John had frequent fights and few friends)

Here is a discussion of one pupil's story in more detail to illustrate further the way in which the stories reflected the child's particular emotional issues:

### *Fred's story*

Seven year old Fred had been excluded from his previous school because of challenging behaviour after which his mother, who had three older children, kept him at home for a term. He had been at his present school for a few weeks when he began the Story Links programme. He was one of the pupils who often self-harmed and had even talked of killing himself.

According to the SENCO, behaviour giving rise to concern in school included banging his head on the desk, punching himself and threatening to kill himself by jumping off the top of the climbing apparatus and other high places. Despite, or perhaps because of, this behaviour, the SENCO also said that adults at the school felt very caring towards him and that *'everybody wants to take him home'*.

Fred did not have any contact with his biological father but had a step-father who was a black African. His mother mentioned a racist incident at his childminder's that had really upset Fred:

I had this phone call and I was here on reception answering the phone and my manager was probably over there and she could hear my son screaming hysterically "I want to die, I wish I could die, I'd be better off dead." And I was sent home from work because... my husband couldn't control him and he (Fred) had been told all black people do is kill you, and my husband's black, by my so-called friend.

Fred's Mum

Fred's anxiety about his relationship with father figures and his self-harming are both clearly reflected in the following Story Links story:

### **Sammy and his Dad**

Sammy the squirrel was in the field feeling very angry because he had lost his dad. Sammy's dad was looking for Sammy everywhere. He was getting very worried.

Sammy started to hit his head on the tree again and again. Sammy started to cry, he did not like hitting his head...

He hit his head all day long and wished his dad were there to look after him. His dad came over the hill and called out to Sammy.

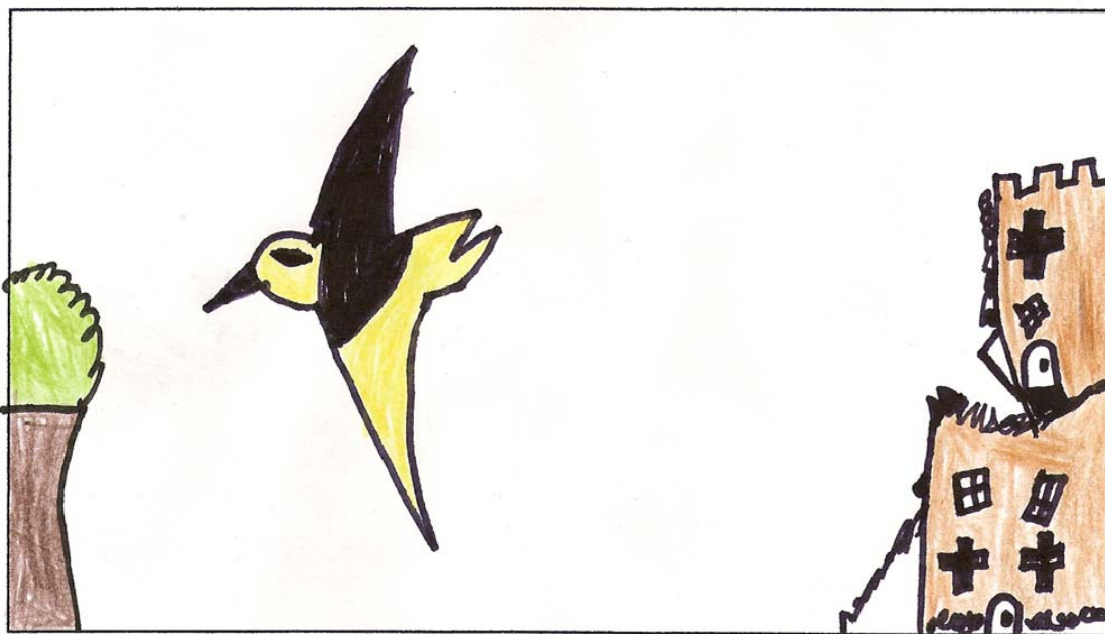
Sammy looked round and saw his dad. He ran up to him. Sammy was crying because he was so happy to be with his dad but his head was hurting. Sammy's dad saw a red mark on Sammy's head. He was worried for Sammy. Sammy was happy. He knew that his dad cared for him and he was there to keep him safe.

Sammy's head hurt a little bit. He knew that he should stop hitting his head because people cared for him and they only wanted him to be happy.

This story also illustrates the way in which the Story Links teacher allows the central dilemma/tension to be explored but also provides a secure emotional 'resting place' at the end of the story.

#### 4.1.4 Use of drawing to deepen the metaphor

In many cases the drawings created by the pupils were very powerful and indicated an emotional engagement with the story characters. For instance, the picture of Gold Fang, below was drawn by Mark, a pupil who had considerable friendship difficulties. Gold Fang was an eagle who had been trapped in a dark tower and was lonely. The story text explains how he finds a way out to the 'top of the tower and stretched out his wings. Finally he was free!' Mark's picture with the strong wings and clear space around the bird and the crumbling, broken-down tower vividly illustrates the sense of freedom experienced by Gold Fang at escaping from his 'tower' of loneliness and deepens the metaphor introduced in the text.



Several of the TAs mentioned how pupils would often chat about and extend the story while they were drawing. For instance Mark's TA commented that he would *'interpret what he imagined on to the paper more'* and Pete's TA reported that *'when he [Pete] was doing the drawing he would sort of say more about them and think about... there was more in his mind that went on.'*

#### 4.1.5 TAs occasionally 'jumped in' to make it 'alright'

While all the TAs worked very well in the sessions some of the SL teachers mentioned that at first the TA had a tendency to *'make everything alright'* in the story rather than allowing the emotional dilemmas within the story to unfold. One commented that, *'it seems like the TA came in and sorted it out...perhaps prematurely'*; and another mentioned how straight away the TA said *'something like "So he said he was very sorry"'*. Another had been concerned that the TA introduced a number of new characters and that this deflected the story from the theme set up by the pupil. However, most of the SL teachers had found that TAs were responsive when the principle of allowing the central dilemma, provided by the pupil, to unfold was explained.

## 4.2 *Impact on significant relationships*

### 4.2.1 Pupil/parent relationship

#### *A mutually enjoyable educational activity for parents and pupils*

One of the platforms on which Story Links is based is that positive attachment takes place when parent and child are engaged together in a 'mutually enjoyable activity' (para 1.3above) and therefore the evaluation examined how much pupils and parents had enjoyed doing the sessions together. The majority of parents (10/12) and all the pupils said they had found the sessions 'enjoyable'.

#### *Parents found the sessions 'fun'*

Parents frequently used words such as 'fun', 'enjoyed' 'giggled' 'laughed' when describing the sessions. Comments included: *'Brilliant, I really enjoyed the sessions- they used to brighten me up on a Tuesday... We had laughs and giggled'* (Lisa's Mum); *'I've enjoyed it. Sometimes it's quite difficult to just take up with the story, so I struggled a little bit with that. But it was fun.* (Ross's foster Mum).

The majority particularly mentioned the humour triggered by the spontaneous story-making activity:

*Actually it's been quite good fun actually...One starts, then the next, and you don't know what the other person's gonna say... I think Harry enjoyed that bit of it.*

*Harry's Mum*

*I come out with a line something about Alfie [cat] was so fat that when he purred he shook the room and we had to stroke him with a broom. And [Story Links teacher] couldn't stop laughing... We had a laugh with it didn't we [to wife]? It was really fun.*

*Rosie's Dad*

Several of the parents also mentioned the satisfaction they got from supporting their child with their learning:

*I enjoyed it...I did and I was glad to be part of it actually .It made me feel like I was actually doing something.*

*Pete's Mum*

*I actually really enjoyed that [story-making] because it was so much fun watching which way Ed's brain went because he's got so much imagination*

*Ed's Mum*

Only two parents did not use words such as 'fun' or enjoy' to describe their experience: one of these mentioned several times that her son had enjoyed the sessions and found them 'fun' but that she herself had found the sessions difficult at first though she gradually became more confident:

*'Well I've personally found the sessions very difficult... I think I struggle wondering about how to put a story together, so it's kind of a mental block for me. So for me it's been a great experience because I feel I've actually gained a bit of confidence myself.*

*Mark's Mum*

The other (Fred's Mum) just said the sessions were 'fine' and that making up stories had been 'easy' and she also attended all the sessions.

### ***Pupils' enjoyed sessions – especially seeing their parents***

All the pupils said that they had enjoyed the Story Links programme (see para 4.7.1 for details). In addition to making up stories, which all pupils enjoyed, the overwhelming reason given as to why they enjoyed the sessions was '*seeing my mum [in school]*'. One said he didn't get much time with Mum at home because of the demands of his sister, another said that he and his Mum didn't '*get time together much*' outside the sessions and several said it was good for their '*reading and writing*'.

*Well I like making up stories...That's been great...I just like to see my mum a bit more...when I'm at home I have my sister around all the time. And I like seeing her alone, my mum.*

*Mark*

*I like seeing my Mum and I like making my own stories*

*Lisa*

*It's really fun and sometimes I do it at home so it's better for my reading and writing. I woke up and I felt right I'm going to enjoy today because...I can go in and see my mum again.*

*Rosie*

*One pupil confessed to being 'a bit nervous at first' about his Mum coming in but added 'just for the first week then it was OK'.*

### ***Enjoying storymaking at home together***

The fact that the storymaking had been a mutually enjoyable activity was confirmed by the fact that 25% of the parent sets started making up stories with their child at home. In two cases siblings had also been included. Rosie's Dad, who was a non-reader himself, was one of these parents and talked about how doing this storymaking with Rosie and her younger brother at home had been '*great fun, yeah, great fun*'. And for John, stories created at home with his mother had informed the school-based story-making session. (see Pupil profile A).

### ***Parents and teachers reflections on the impact on the parent/pupil relationship***

Apart from commenting on how much they had enjoyed the sessions a number of parents spoke about how the programme had supported their relationship with their child. For instance, when Ian's Mum was asked '*What's it like being Ian's Mum?*' in the pre interview she didn't reply at first but then said:

*The silence says it all. It's challenging, hard work, it's constant really, yes, constant attention he needs, that's it really... He's emotional, he's very quick tempered, frustrated or angry.*

However in her post interview she talked about how the sessions in school and the reading at home had improved their relationship:

*I think it's brought us closer, Ian and me... definitely...I think he enjoyed my company, me coming in to school as part of his club and for us to do it together at home... And then he said "We haven't got a Friday Club any more. Can you and I have another club?" So we're going to have a club at home... it's a trust thing as well, I think. I think Ian trusts me now not to get angry with him [when he reads].*

*Ian's Mum*

For Pete's Mum, it had been a revelation to see how much her son valued spending time with her in school:

*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 [TA] said he used to get quite excited and he couldn't wait for me to come in.*

*Pete's Mum*

She also commented on how she had learnt some new things about her son from doing the stories such as *'he likes picnics which I didn't even realise.'*

Many of the professionals, like Ian's Story Links teacher, also commented on how pupils had been eager to get to the sessions in order to see their parents:

*He would often arrive at our sessions a few minutes early, so in other words he missed the last few minutes of golden time because he was quite keen to get to the story session and he particularly liked the fact that mum was there, he was always very pleased to see her.*

*Ian's SL teacher*

And Mark's TA reported that his whole demeanour would change when she reminded him of his mother coming into school. She said he often looked unhappy and had *'a lot of behaviour problems, he lashes out sometimes'* but that

*I saw the side with his mum and we saw kind of his more happiness with mum so the relationship... I'd like see him in the playground and go "Oh yes, don't forget we're doing the Story Links with your mum later" and he'd like smile and seemed quite excited about it. So it was something he looked forward to.*

*Mark's TA*

Several Story Links teachers also indicated that pupils felt 'special' at having their parent engage with them in school:

*I think it made him feel quite special and I think he really loved his Mum coming in and she was great, she was very cooperative and very pleased to do it. So I felt it actually went very well.*

*Ian's SL teacher*

### Undivided attention of the parent

For some of the pupils the sessions had provided a space where they could have their parents' undivided attention without competition from their siblings. One of these was Beth who was one of seven children. Her Story Links teacher talked about the importance for her of this 'me time' with her mother:

*I think it made a huge difference to Beth, that her mum actually came in for her, you know I think this idea of something special for the kid, as far as the parent is concerned, is very important... I think the simple time spent on her, it's been an exercise that she has looked upon as personal, this is 'me' time and she's got new time from Mum. Now she's in a big family, it must be difficult for Mum to give her time. So actually what Mum has done is actually give her twenty minutes undivided attention and a cuddle at the end of it... I think Beth really likes that [cuddle]*

*Beth's SL teacher*

### The story as a positive reminder of the parent

In most of the pupils' stories a nurturing mother figure appears and had often been introduced by the Story Links teacher or the parent themselves, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

The Dino sat down with his Mum **and** had a cup of dragon tea and two chocolate biscuits before he had to go to bed.

*(Aaron's story)*

He saw a bear and ran off and went home to his Mum.

*(Ian's story)*

In a number of the stories with a domestic animal as the main character, the animal's 'owner' often appeared and seemed to take the role of a parental figure:

Bo the dog used to bark all the time. He barked and barked and barked. His owners had a clever machine which changed Bo's barks into words. Bo's barks said, "Go away, go away, go away!"

*(John's story)*

There was in fact either a parent or 'owner' at some point in all of the pupils' final collection of stories.

### Expressions of affection in reality and in the story metaphor

As physical closeness and warmth is an integral part of a healthy attachment relationship between parent and child, hugs and kisses are encouraged between the parent and child at the beginning and end of sessions. Some of the Story Links teachers commented on the physical expression of affection between some of the pupils and parents. For instance, Fred's Story Links teacher had this to say:



*At first when he would come in he would want to go up to her and put his arm round her, she wasn't that responsive...And then one week she actually held out her hands...That was towards the end. Yes because initially we had to say, "Say goodbye to Mum, go and give her a hug," and it was all very [pause] but then she started doing it.*

*Fred's SL teacher*

Fred's Mum had not been able to make time to hear him read at home and said that she had passed this responsibility onto his older brother. She clearly had an idea that reading together could support attachment as she added that she thought this would *'bring the children closer'*.

In fact, from what Fred said, this reading and 'closeness' with the brother did not actually take place. It seemed that Fred brought his unmet attachment needs into school as he appeared to evoke a desire for protection and emotional closeness in the adults supporting him:

*I just want to hug him...that's what most people feel as well... the adult response is you just want to try and help him when he's really angry.*

*Fred's SENCO*

And Lisa's Story Links teacher mentioned how when Lisa came into the room for the Story Links session she was eager to have some affection from her mother but, like Fred, did not receive a warm response from her mother:

*Lisa comes in and kind of flings herself at her mother, and she clings on to her almost like a kitten might cling on if they were afraid of falling and her mum will say something like, "Sit in your place Lisa."*

Over two or three sessions the Story Links teacher recalled how Lisa *'started acting like a younger child. She started clinging to her mother and peeping out behind- but Mum didn't want any of this and would swat her away'*. Lisa had then started to refuse to read and said that she didn't want to do the Story Links sessions and that her mum *'needn't bother to come'*. However, Lisa's Mum had said *'Well I'm coming anyway, so we'll see how you feel when I get there.'* The Story Links teacher thought Lisa had been *'sort of like testing her mum, you know?'* and that *'when her Mum did come she had actually been quite happy.'*

Lisa's Story Links teacher reported that around the same time as this reluctance to engage with the Story Links sessions she decided to bring *'a few bits of cuddling into the stories'*. Here is an example of how this was included in the story metaphor:

He (Max the cat) found his owner, Amy. He wanted to be with her. Max liked Amy. She picked him up and put him on her lap. She stroked his soft warm fur. Max purred and purred. He liked Amy to stroke him.

*(Lisa's story)*

The Story Links teacher also reported that *'I started giving permission, you know I started saying, "Do you want to give your mum a cuddle?"'* Mum had then started to respond to her daughter and Lisa, according to the Story Links teacher, then began to be *'more relaxed'* and started to make some progress with her reading. Towards the end of the sessions she also noticed a change in Lisa's mother's communication with herself:



*It was quite interesting because today she (Mum) actually smiled at me and made proper eye contact whereas before she literally just kind of sits there.*

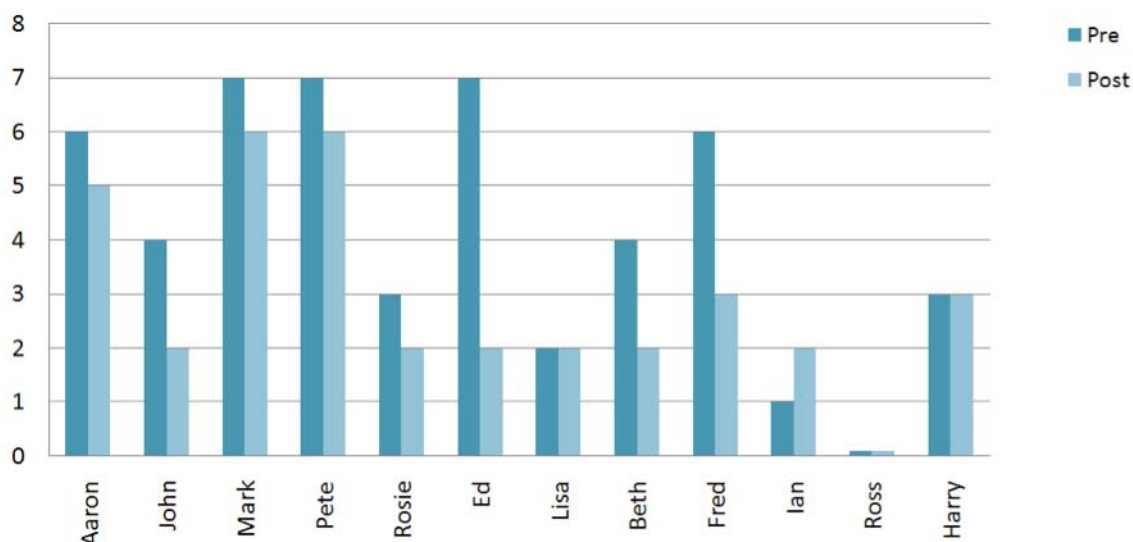
*Lisa's SL teacher*

In fact in her post interview Lisa's Mum said, 'I've enjoyed coming in...Just coming along and making the story up with Lisa - and seeing Lisa' She added that the reading at home had been 'a cosy thing to do, one to one with Lisa.'

#### 4.2.2 Impact on peer and sibling relationships

The results of the SDQ completed by pupils' classteachers indicate a significant improvement in pupils' peer relationships across the group, as shown in Figure 5 below. Pre intervention just under two-thirds of the pupils had above average difficulties in getting along with their peers in school, with five of these falling into the 'very high' category. However, the post SDQ showed that these difficulties had reduced for all 7 of the 'above average' pupils and only 2 remained in the 'very high' category.

**Figure 5: Goodman's SDQ for Impact on Difficulties Getting Along with Other Children**



**Key:** 0-3= Close to average; 4= Slightly raised; 5= High; 6 -10= Very High

#### Specific pupil observations

The pupil who showed the **greatest improvement** in peer relationships at school was Ed, who was one of five children and had a brother, a couple of years younger with severe physical disabilities. This improvement, according to his mother had been mirrored at home in his relationship with his younger disabled brother:

*At home his behaviour has improved tenfold, he had some quite severe anger issues...he suffers from an awful lot of frustration-especially regarding his brother...major, major, major improvement all round... [with] the anger.*

His mother also commented on how his peer relationships at school had improved:

*He started removing himself from potential problems. Whereas in the past he would just have lashed and fought you know and had fights now, and all of the teachers have commented to me about how impressed they are with him because the other children also know which buttons to press with Ed, so if they're bored or whatever they'll sort of start and he actually walks away... He's not perfect, he'll never be perfect... He's got the maturity now to walk away.*

The pupil with the lowest score for difficulties with peers pre and post intervention, indicating that he good social relationships throughout, was the child in long term foster care. This was probably due to his referral being primarily for poor literacy and inattention in the classroom.

### Observations by parents on peer relationships

As the primary focus of the Story Links intervention is on individual work with the pupil, the main data relating to peer relationships in school was gathered from the classteachers as discussed above. However, the mothers of the two boys whose scores remained in the 'very high' SDQ category for friendship difficulties also talked about their sons' relationships with peers. Pete's Mum talked about how they had used the story metaphor to focus on her son's friendship difficulties and that he had gradually become more empathic within his own story contribution:

*He does have a slight conflict when he's playing so we tried to emphasise on how, how he would feel especially if he was like Gordon (the Gorilla), how he would feel. So you know I think there was one bit in here that one of them went up and hurt the other one and he came out with 'Oh he was really upset' which before we wouldn't have got him to write that.*

*Pete's Mum*

She added that at home Pete was, *'a lot more concerned about his brother now. Whereas before you know his brother was a nuisance. And now they're actually getting on quite well.'*

Making progress with friendships was also observed by Mark's mother: *'He has also in the last few weeks got a new friendship; really got that working'*. This view was supported by his Story Links teacher.

*It's a terrible thing isn't it with these children, the children who are the most needy of friendships and wanting to need to socialise are sometimes the ones that put everybody off them all, and I would think he was like that... He seems better now... people will engage with him more... and although his relationships with children are rocky they're not impossible.*

*Mark's SL teacher*

### Use of stories to address difficulties with siblings

Sibling rivalry can be related to anxious attachment (Bowlby, 1973) and often the relational pattern towards siblings is transferred to children's wider friendships. This section presents two

examples of how the sessions were used to process the pupil's ambivalent feelings towards siblings.

### *Ross's story*

One of nine-year old Ross's stories particularly addressed the issue of sibling rivalry between himself and his thirteen-year old old brother, both of whom were in long-term foster placement. At the time of the Story Links Programme, their foster carer was finding it very difficult to cope with the older brother's challenging behaviour. The Story Links teacher reported that about three weeks into the programme, Ross's foster carer was *'in tears one week about Ross's older brother and we weren't able to do the session'*. The Story Links teacher took her to the staff room where the foster mother explained that it had been *'difficult at home with C [older brother]'* and that Ross would sometimes get into the role of protecting her. According to the Story Links teacher Ross may be the *'preferred'* child.

After a couple of weeks of the Story Links programme the message came from home that Ross's older brother, C, wanted to also be included in the stories. Ross then put him in as a black scorpion using his real name C (not recommended in the training). Ross described his main character Freddie and the scorpion as *'arch enemies'* and according to his foster mother *'wanted to keep killing him off'*. At one point Ross said that the scorpion was going to be run over but as the story went round the circle the adults changed it to a more minor accident:

Freddie 'accidentally' ran over C's, the black scorpion's, toe with a quad bike. Because of this C popped one of the tyres on the bike.

The story continued,

Freddie said "Sorry" but C was very angry because he had to go back into the hospital. He already had a broken arm because he had been fighting with a red lobster and he lost.

Two stories later the scorpion appears again and one the group suggested that Freddie makes friends with the scorpion. Ross' contribution was

Freddie thought and thought about it for a long time. Sometimes he had wished C was dead or not even around. He could not decide what to say.

After some input to the story from the adults, the story brought about a resolution to the conflict:

As Freddie was thinking he started remembering how he and C used to get on and the fun times they had shared together. He remembered once in the jungle how they had had a race to climb a tree and how C had won. He chuckled to himself as he remembered trying his best to scramble up the tree. He looked at C and nodded "Yes he said let's try to be friends."



C, the scorpion, held out his unbroken leg and Freddie held out his paw. They shook on it.

A few sessions later Ross wanted to have a character that also had his own name in the story. At one point when the scorpion and the character 'Ross' are on a sea journey from England to Africa, a thunderstorm strikes and now 'Ross' comes to the rescue of the scorpion who was *'really very frightened because he could not swim and was feeling sick'*. At this point Ross had the story character 'Ross' saying to the scorpion: *'Get in my pocket, stay there safe and I will look after you.'*

Ross spoke about the above story in his post interview:

*I read it to my brother as well... He wanted to be in it and then I put him in it and I put him as a black scorpion... He didn't want to be a black scorpion (but) it was already in the book... they were arch enemies... and they made friends.*

#### 4.2.3 The Teaching Assistant as a school-based attachment figure

It appeared that all the pupils had formed good relationships with the teaching assistant (TA) who attended the sessions and also provided the 2 x 20 min follow-up reading practice sessions each week. 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' (Bomber, 2008) providing them with a 'secure emotional base' in school.

In some cases it had been arranged that the TA would continue to support the pupil once the Story Links programme finished in order to capitalise on the trusting relationship that had developed with the pupil:

*He built up this very good relationship with the TA... and now the Story Links is going to stop and I didn't want to leave him high and dry, so what we have gone on to do... as the reading has improved...is that now he's going to have to do some writing of his own, so they will do some talking of a story and then he'll do some writing so that will be the extension.*

*Mark's SL teacher*

Bomber (ibid) points out that the presence of a positive attachment figure in school is particularly important for pupils like Ross who are in care. The Story Links programme appeared to have facilitated the development of such a relationship between Ross and his TA who talked about how she had made a 'link' with Ross which '*carries on outside the sessions*'. She felt that she was able to be a reminder for him of what he had achieved in the sessions:

*What he learns from story writing he can then take that, I'm that reminder in school that he knows that those skills that he has to use for problem-solving aren't just on a Thursday morning at 9 o'clock*

When asked what she thought these problem-solving skills were she replied,

*What I picked out was that he was very thoughtful, that he had a good memory, he could recall when we were going through the story he could remember how he had resolved a problem before it was thought up in the story.*

Ross's foster mother, like other parents, had appreciated getting to know the TA:

*When Ross goes into Year 5, he's going to go to her (TA) and have extra lessons and so it's nice to meet her and Ross likes her*

However, in one case, issues had sometimes arisen when the pupil had formed a strong attachment with the TA but then had to share her with other pupils:

*If he hasn't got that one-on-one then that's it, he'll disrupt the rest of the group and it's quite hard work.*

*John's TA*

John's Story Links teacher thought that the reason for this might be that '*he's had specialist attention from her -he may want more of that*'. The experience of John's TA underlines the fragility of relationships for these vulnerable pupils.<sup>6</sup> (See also individual pupil profile A)

### 4.3 *Impact on pupils' behaviour and rates of exclusion*

#### 4.3.1 **Impact on behaviour in the classroom**

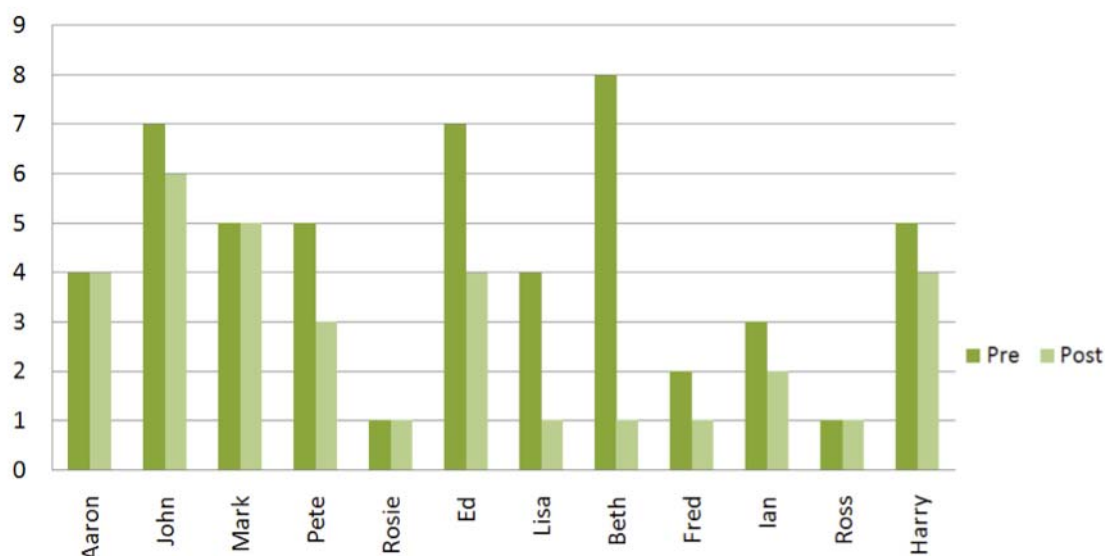
Figure 6 below shows the improvement in behaviour pre and post the intervention as indicated by the Goodman's SDQ. Nine of the pupils scored above average for behavioural difficulties before the Story Links intervention with six of these falling into the 'very high' category. By the

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<sup>6</sup> A TA who supported the sessions run by the researcher to pilot the evaluation tools, though not included in this main evaluation, had a similar experience. She had said how for the first couple of weeks the pupil started following her around the school at any opportunity. This was a very anxious and angry **seven** year old boy who often ran out of class and found it difficult to form relationships with either adults or peers. He started to engage positively with reading with the TA in their sessions –something he was unable to do in class. However, a couple of weeks into the programme the TA had to reprimand him in the corridor about an incident and after that he refused to work with her.

end of the intervention there had been a significant reduction in the behavioural difficulties of seven out of these nine, the scores for the remaining two 'above average' pupils stayed constant.

**Figure 6: Goodman's SDQ for Impact on Pupils' Behavioural Difficulties in School**



**Key:** 0-2 = Close to average; 3 = Slightly raised ; 4=high; 5-10 =Very High;

### Specific pupil observations

It might be pertinent, given that the intervention targeted pupils with BESDs, to consider the three pupils, Ross, Rosie and Fred, who fell in the 'close to average' initial score bracket. The first, Ross, was in long-term foster care and the concerns about him focused on his inattention. For, Rosie, the second pupil in this bracket, her SENCO said 'she's not the sort of child to be excluded, it's all internal with her'. However she had self-excluded when upset and there were serious concerns about her self-harming. The SENCO also had this to say:

*In the past she's pulled hair out and she had to have her hair cut because it was pulled out so much, and now she's resorting to sort of scratching her face...her main problem is emotional, she doesn't have really behaviour problems. She's needing a lot of support for anxiety type difficulties...She has had quite a turbulent childhood, the family moved from B from very quite dangerous circumstances and I think that she worries a lot for the safety of her family, her family do have a fair amount of disputes with neighbours and I think the neighbours actually are quite frightening for Rosie and she tends to [pause] ... take it out on herself.*

The third pupil, seven year old Fred, with an initial 'close to average' score had recently joined the school having been excluded from his previous school because of challenging behaviour and

was on a part-time timetable at the start of the Story Links programme. Like Rosie, he also had self-harming tendencies and according to his SENCO had threatened to kill himself by jumping off high places. However, while the SDQ behaviour difficulties score for Ross and Rosie correlated with the interview data, in the case of Fred there seems to be some discrepancy between these. According to the SL teacher, who was also his SENCO, Fred's self-harming tendencies was also accompanied by challenging behaviour. Here is an excerpt from her initial interview:

*He ran out (of class) and then he threatened to jump off the top of the climbing frame... he hides quite a lot as well... That's him running off, hiding, swearing, saying he wants to kill himself (and saying) 'I don't care about my f-ing certificates'*

*Fred's SENCO*

His last statement in the above quotation obviously refers to an individual behaviour reward programme that appears not to have been working at that point in time!

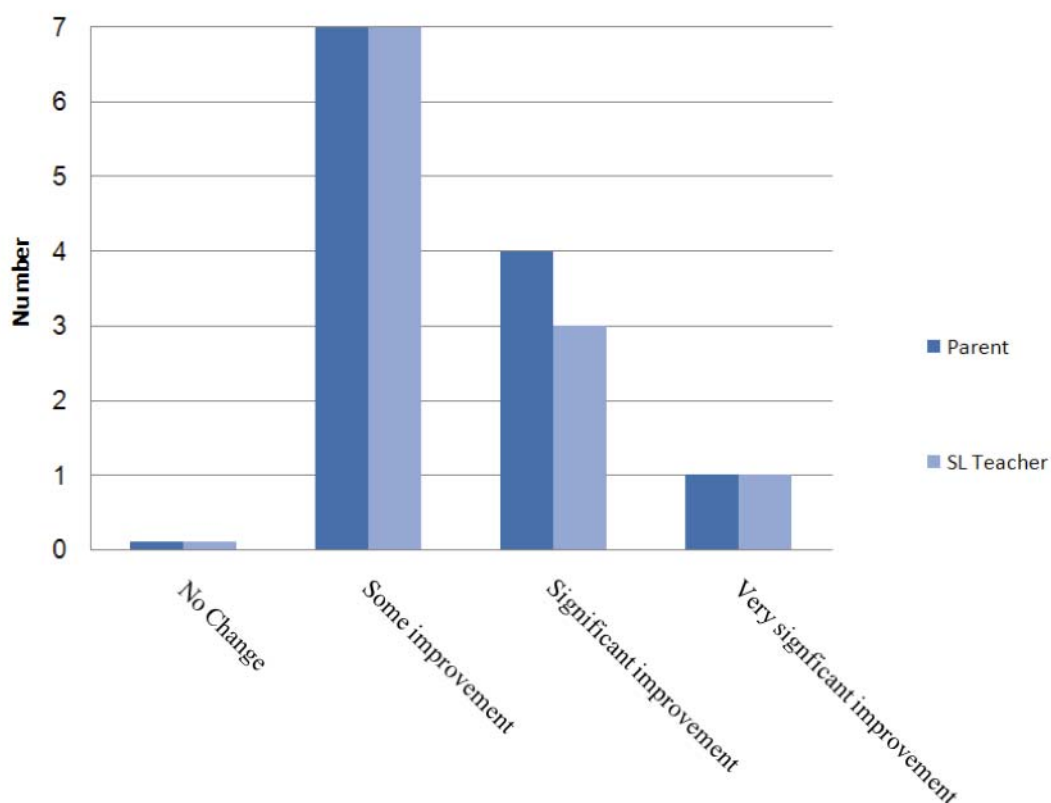
In considering the SDQ scores for the group it is also important to bear in mind that two of the pupils, Ian and Aaron, were both in small classes in a special school with a strong focus on behaviour management and, as their classteachers pointed out, their scores for behaviour difficulties would probably have been much higher if they had been in a mainstream classroom.

#### **4.3.2 Parent and Story Links teachers views on impact on pupils' behaviour**

Figure 7 below shows that all parents and Story Links teachers thought there had been an improvement in the behaviour of pupils in the cohort. Teachers' views obviously related only to behaviour in school whereas parents were asked to make a judgement on their child's behaviour in both home and school contexts.



Figure 7: Parent and teachers views on impact of SLP on pupils' behaviour



### Specific pupil observations

There was a close correlation between the parent and teacher ratings for individual pupils and it was the same pupil, Ed, who was considered by his teacher and mother to have made 'very significant' improvement. His mother had this to say,

*OK, I was pretty sure this would help his reading, which is why I was doing it, what I wasn't prepared for was the impact it's had on the rest of his life. The difference it has made to him has been absolutely. He had a fantastic school report from his teacher when we had a Parent Teacher evening, his teacher was absolutely amazed at the improvement in his behaviour... At home his behaviour has improved tenfold, he had some quite severe anger issues... The anger, he started removing himself from potential problems... whereas in the past he would just have lashed and fought you know and had fight. Now, and all of the teachers have commented to me about how impressed they are with him, because the other children also know which buttons to press with Ed, so if they're bored or whatever they'll sort of start and he actually walks away.*



She later added,

*He's not perfect, he'll never be perfect [but] he's got the maturity now to walk away. It's like his brain's fired up which is absolutely brilliant, I really, really didn't expect one hour a day to have this impact on his life. And I've got nothing but praise for it.*

It seems that one of things to come out of the sessions was that Ed was now less egocentric and more able to negotiate in his relationship with his mother:

*He is now aware when I'm busy and he doesn't bug me, he'll step back, whereas before whatever I'm doing he'd be straight in and you'd end up "Oh for goodness sake!" Now he'll step back and wait until I'm finished ... instead of being completely self-orientated as children are, beginning to look outside and offering to help.*

*Ed's Mum*

Ed's SENCO also spoke about his improved behaviour in school saying that before the Story Links programme he had been taken off the playground *'nearly every day'*. She said that there was still *'an incident involving Ed probably once a week'* but added that although this *'might not sound great, it is compared to [before]'*

Comments from other parents and Story Links teachers in final interviews highlight precisely the difference the Story Links programme made to their behaviour. Lisa's Mum said that she used to *'have little tantrums and walk out of class'* but that *'all that's stopped now and she's a lot more happier'*. Rosie's Dad said that his daughter now *'tends to think before she acts'* and Mark's Story Links teacher said that whereas there used to be complaints about his behaviour in the playground *'not just daily but twice daily'*, these had lessened.

### **Two steps forward and one step back**

For the majority of the pupils whose behaviour had improved, however, there were clearly times when their behaviour could still slip back:

*He still has the odd outburst... but I think they're getting less and less and he's learning to calm himself down before it gets to the point of no return.*

*Aaron's Mum*

*I would say generally there was an improvement in his behaviour but there have been days when he has slipped back on his behaviour.*

*Pete's TA*

This correlated with what Pete's Mum had to say about his behaviour:

*I think he doesn't lash out and he has kind of like controlled that anyway. But it's a lot of like, there's a lot of verbal sort of things that are going on and things that shouldn't be said.*

*Pete's Mum*

One of the Story Links teachers mentioned how she was disappointed to notice that improvements seen in the Story Links sessions for Mark were not carried over into the classroom:

*In the Story Links sessions... all of us had built up a fairly good and trusting relationship but when I had his class for a PPA cover it was as though he was back being in my classroom as he had been in Year 3, although not quite as bad as he had been then, but attention seeking and irritating other children...So it was a bit disappointing really.*

*Mark's SL teacher*

And Mark's Mum also said that while he was beginning to develop an awareness of issues beyond himself, she thought it was still *'a very, very slow process'*.

### 4.3.3 Behaviour in Story Links sessions

All the Story Links teachers reported that the pupils' behaviour had been remarkably good in the actual Story Links sessions. Some teachers and parents had been surprised at how well the pupil behaved in sessions compared to their previous behaviour in school:

*He loved it, his behaviour was impeccable throughout...It's incredible...[I] still see him around school and he still does quite a bit, you know, gets involved in stuff but he never once did in that setting.*

*Aaron's SL teacher*

*He's got a temper and... he does start messing around so it was nice just... having (him) calm and just being kind of creative, it was lovely.*

*Mark's TA*

*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 [SL teacher] was amazed*

*Pete's Mum*

However, a number of the pupils had taken a few sessions to settle down. As pupils' behaviour in Story Links sessions was intricately connected to their degree of engagement with the educational task this is discussed in the section on engagement with learning (4.5.7 below).

### 4.3.4 Implementation of the classroom/parent behaviour reward system

Part of the Story Links programme was to involve the classteacher in providing a score for the pupil's behaviour in class during the week (see They are then joined 1.4). The TA brings this score to the session and a reward system is negotiated between parent and child. However, only a minority of the Story Links teachers had managed to implement this consistently. Some had just forgotten to do it and others, like Mark's Story Links teacher, had found difficulty in getting the classteacher to implement it:

*Actually I found the teacher was the biggest problem in this whole thing because he didn't remember or he didn't sort of make a mental note and he didn't respond when the TA came in.*

*Mark's SL teacher*

In Fred's case the Story Links teacher and TA were concerned that his mother was using the promise of a reward to control him:

*The treat was some major magazine and something else... and she said 'But you don't get it if you don't do this and you don't get it if you don't do that, and you don't do' and we were like 'Well it's just if he [his score] goes up he will get this treat and so you've got to decide.'*

TA

For some pupils the behaviour target and reward had worked to a limited degree. Pete's target had been to *'come straight into class after break'* as he would usually *'wander all over the school'* and had *'a habit of taking different routes and spending time in the toilet and then taking a long route back to class.'* His Story Links teacher said that he *'did improve although again he needed monitoring and prompting.'* His treat from Mum had been *'an extra kick boxing lesson'* but *'she didn't give him a treat that often'*.

However, for a few pupils the involvement of the classteacher in the reward system had worked well and provided a valuable link with the classteacher. In one case where the target was used consistently, the parent thought it was the communication from the classteacher rather than the reward that was important:

*I don't think he was bothered about the reward but he just liked to hear the score, and that we were pleased, and if he wasn't he was quite interested to think about oh I'll try harder next week so I think he enjoyed that, so I think that was important...And especially the link with the class teacher.*

Aaron's Mum

#### 4.3.5 The story as a reflection of pupils' changed behaviour

Of course there would have been a wide range of other factors, both at home and at school, that may have had an impact on pupils' behaviour during the course of the intervention. However, for one pupil, Harry, the connection between home and school provided by the Story Links sessions appeared to have supported quite a dramatic improvement in his behaviour, and for this reason an account of his case is presented here.

##### *Harry's story*

According to his classteacher nine-year old Harry would often *'throw himself on the floor screaming'* when asked to do a task and would also frequently run out of class. The SENCO added at that other times he would *'hide under a table and start wailing and will need coaxing out'*. She described his *'wailing'* as like *'an air-raid siren going off'* and added that this was very distressing for the other children and would lead to his removal from the classroom. The SENCO said that these episodes would usually be *'in response to some minor thing that he is scared of - scared of cats one day and not the next...'* another time when asked to do handwriting he said *'the sun is shining and I don't like it when the sun was out.'*

Mum had attended most of the sessions though had missed three in the middle - once with an understandable reason and twice without giving a reason. The SENCO reported that on one of these occasions Harry had *'an outburst of tears'* when his Mum didn't turn up. In all of the Story Links sessions Harry's behaviour had been exemplary and the SENCO said that *'it's been*

*rewarding for us to see that he's so engaged and so happy and feels that he can actually produce something.'*

However, in the main classroom, Harry's behaviour continued to be very difficult at times over the Story Links period – until the week before the sessions finished. In the final interview the classteacher was laughing as she said *'this week he has been exceptionally good'* and seemed almost in a state of disbelief because his behaviour had improved so dramatically. She said he had previously had odd 'good' days but that *'we've never had a whole good week before.'* She said he had also *'started to pick up books and sit and pretend read'* which he had not done before. The SENCO confirmed this saying that in class over the last week there had been *'no outbursts, no tantrums, no refusing to do anything, working cooperatively. He's been very engaged, very sensible, questioning'*.

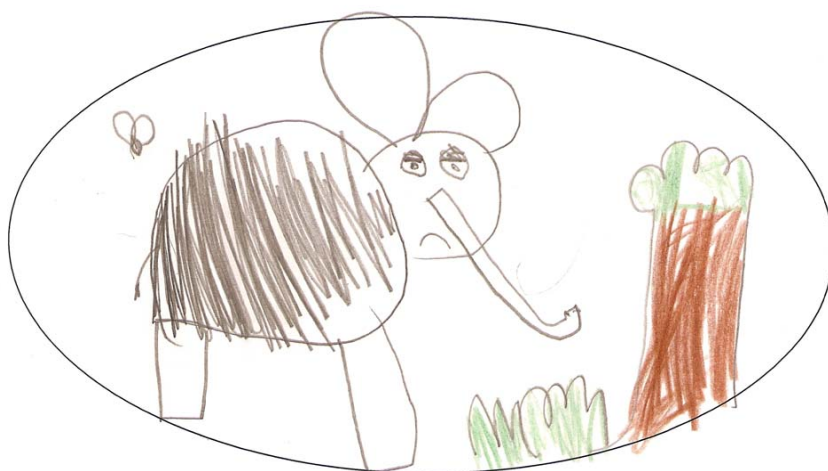
In his post interview Harry said that the Story Links sessions had made him *'feel happy and it feels like I'm at home [when Mum comes in]...It helps me because Mummy helps me.'* Harry was then asked how he thought his behaviour had been and this is the conversation that followed:

- Harry:** *I haven't been this way ever...*
- Researcher:** *What's this way?*
- Harry:** *I haven't been this way since when I was in year 1.*
- Researcher:** *What is this way? Being better behaved?*
- Harry:** *Mmm. And then I was good at spelling and handwriting in Year 1.*
- Researcher:** *Why do you think you didn't get any better until now?*
- Harry:** *Because I think it was I'm sort of (mumbles) got scared easily that why I go all panicky.*
- Researcher:** *Do you think you've got over that now?*
- Harry:** *Mmm...*
- Researcher:** *What do you think has helped?*
- Harry:** *The stories, because they're good.*
- Researcher:** *Do you think you'll be able to keep this up.*
- Harry:** *Yes, if my brother leaves the landing light on.*

The seemingly tenuous connection between Harry's behaviour and how Harry went to sleep (i.e. with landing light left on) was also brought up by Harry's mother in her post interview. She said that over the previous week Harry *'hasn't slept in my bed'* and that while she had *'tried everything'* to stop him sleeping with her in the past, he had *'never gone a week before... this is the first week he's been more grown up'*.

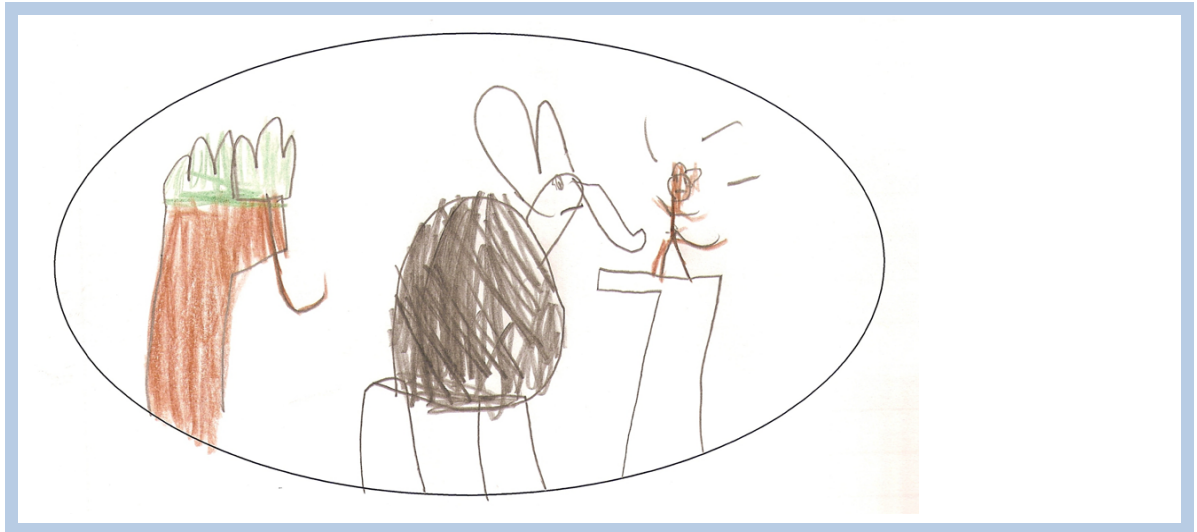
In the following story written in a session soon after Mum started attending again the metaphor appears to have echoes of Harry's 'wailing' in class, his 'monkey-like' behaviour, the sleep issue and also the need for the 'baby' part of Harry to feel close to his mother:

One day Ed the elephant plodded around the jungle. He was tired and needed to rest. Ed heard a crying over in the distance of the valley. It was a long way away. Ed could not have a rest now. He had to see who was crying. He plodded all day and all night. He plodded across the dusty valley. His legs were tired and his trunk felt heavy. He carried on plodding and then had to rest. Then he heard the crying again.



He turned around and saw... two eyes. They were big and green and sad.

It was a baby monkey. The mummy monkey had dropped him. So Ed carefully picked up the baby monkey with his trunk and reached up into the tree. The baby jumped up into the tree. The baby jumped onto the branch. The baby looked around and saw the mummy monkey's tail hanging from a nearby tree. He jumped from tree to tree until he could jump onto the mummy monkey's back. Now Ed could have his rest.



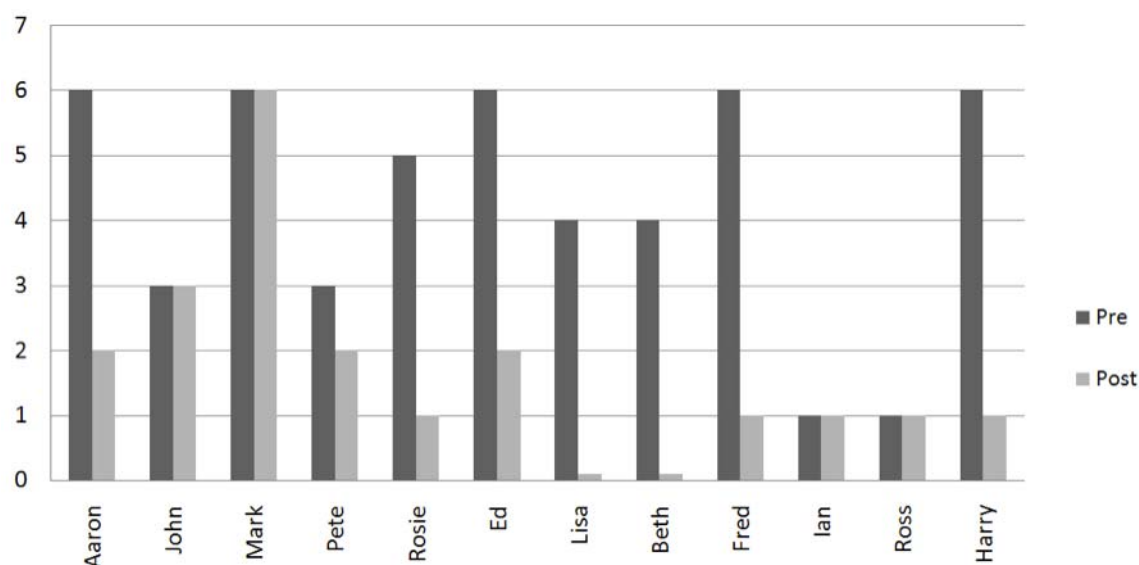
The change in Harry's behaviour had been so dramatic that the SENCO agreed to inform the researcher as to whether his improved behaviour continued the following week. She rang to say that the improvement had been maintained apart from two days when he had regressed. On speaking to his mother the SENCO heard that he had returned to sleeping with his mother on the two nights preceding these 'bad behaviour' days. However, he then returned to sleeping in his own bed and his behaviour again improved.

In Harry's case it seems clear that the change in his sleeping arrangements at home was a key factor impacting on his behaviour at school, though this was not the only factor. Both the jointly created stories and the regular contact between home and school, provided by the Story Links programme, provided a chance for the school and mother to think together, both directly and indirectly through the stories, about Harry's behaviour, his sleeping arrangements and the 'emotional containment' that Harry so clearly needed. In addition, Harry's enjoyment of the Story Links activities may have provided him with a reminder of a previous time in his school career when he was engaged with learning.

#### **4.3.6 Impact of pupils' difficulties on the classteacher and the learning of peers**

The risk of pupils' exclusion from the classroom clearly depends very much on how their behaviour is impacting on the class teacher's ability to teach and whether it is disturbing the learning of their peers. Figure 8 below shows how the pupil's difficulties impacted on the teacher and the other pupils in the classroom.

**Figure 8: Goodman's SDQ for impact of pupils' difficulties on the child's learning environment**



**Key:** 0 = Close to average; 1 = Slightly raised; 2 = High; ≥ 3 = Very High

For two-thirds of the group the impact of their difficulties on the learning environment decreased and for the remaining one-third they remained the same. The dramatic improvement indicated by the SDQ for many of the pupils in this area correlated with the interview data, as illustrated in the above discussion in section 4.3.5 regarding Harry's behaviour in the classroom.

#### 4.3.7 Exclusion from school, classroom and playground

There was a reduction in the number of exclusions from school, classroom and playground over the course of the Story Links programme as shown in Figure 9.

**Figure 9: Exclusions pre and post Story Links**

	Exclusion over 12 months pre-Story Links programme			Exclusion during Story Links programme		
	School	Classroom	Playground	School	Classroom	Playground
Twice or more a 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



### Exclusion from school

During the Story Links programme no pupils were excluded from school and the pupil who had previously self-excluded attended well. This is in contrast to the beginning where six had previously been excluded from school and two of these only in the last year.

### Exclusion from classroom and playground

Exclusions from the classroom and playground significantly decreased, as shown in Figure 9, with only three being removed ‘*about once a week*’ and one being removed ‘*two or three times*’ over the twelve weeks of the intervention. Exclusions from the playground also reduced, though to a lesser degree with the number of pupils being removed from the playground ‘*twice or more per week*’ going down from five to three. This was also in contrast with their behaviour during the twelve months before the intervention when eleven of the pupils were regularly removed from the classroom or playground because of their behaviour.

## 4.4 Engagement of parents with the Story Links programme

### 4.4.1 Parental attendance as a sign of engagement

One measure of parental engagement in their child’s learning that is very significant in this project is the parent’s attendance at the sessions. For many it was a new experience coming into school to help their child learn. In a number of cases the school had a low expectation of the participation of the parents and had considered that they were unlikely to be reliable. As Figure 10 (parental attendance) shows this turned out not to be the case. Parents attended well and proved to be very committed, much to the surprise of some of the teachers, one of whom said:

*Mum is very eager, surprisingly eager, the school is quite shocked that she’s actually turning up religiously and is very committed.*

*John’s SL teacher*

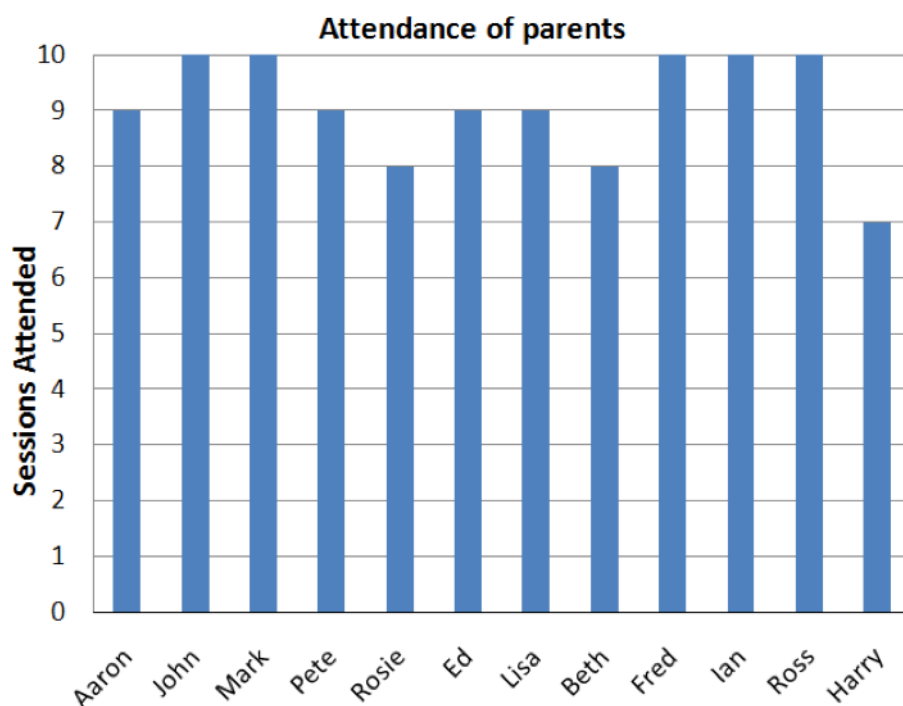
And another:

*Right at the beginning we didn’t think that her mother would be able to come. She made a lot of excuses about not being able to get here at the right time. We were very flexible and we just accommodated her and since that second week she’s never missed a session, she comes promptly on time.*

*Lisa’s SL teacher*



Figure 10: Attendance of parents



The SENCO of a school located in an area of social deprivation (34% on SEN register) where two behaviour support teachers had worked with four sets of parents and pupils confirmed the teachers' surprise at the parents' attendance, comparing it to when they had previously tried to engage parents by running a 'Children's University':

*[at] our school we can have something like a Children's University and most schools would have the parents beating the door down (but) we would be lucky to get two parents to come along. So to have those four parents with that level of take up, they've all had colds over the last few weeks as they always do, but mostly they've managed to find a way around it and turn up.*

SENCO

The significance of parental attendance as a major indicator of motivation for this programme is highlighted by the case of Beth. Beth's mother had seven children, several of whom had various medical conditions and she had problems with her hips. She admitted that poor literacy was also an issue for her: *'I can't read very well myself'*. Despite these difficulties, she had still managed to attend all but two sessions. The Story Links teacher commented on the challenge this must have presented for her on several levels:

*Mum's extremely keen to help but I don't think she's literate herself so actually to introduce a story into the house is a bit challenging for Mum and I don't think many of the older children are very good at reading either...Mum is very enthusiastic about the project but of course she has her own issues about whether she can get here or not...this is the second one she's missed out of 10, which I think actually is quite good because it's quite an effort for her to do.'*

He also mentioned that one week Beth's mother was *'almost tearful'* when she rang to say she couldn't attend the session.

### Factors supporting parental attendance

The behaviour support teachers working at the above SENCO's school felt that the most important *'ingredient'* in delivering the programme was *'engaging the parents'*. They indicated a number of factors that had particularly supported this engagement.

**Firstly**, the Story Links teachers had arranged a pre-meeting with tea and biscuits for all the parents to tell them what the Story Links programme was about and to stress the commitment. They gave them the chance to meet each other although they noticed that *'they didn't actually want to speak to each other at all.'*

**Secondly**, they had started to remind the parents each week about the session by sending *'a text on Monday and a phone call on Tuesday morning.'* Without this, they thought that the parents would have forgotten *as 'a lot of them lead very chaotic lives.'*

**Thirdly**, they thought the good attendance was also due to the SENCO who had *'matched the kids and the parents to the programme because she knew them.'* This was particularly important as they were members of the Learning Support Agency and did not work at the school or know the pupils prior to the programme. The behaviour support teachers continued to liaise with the SENCO throughout the programme. The SENCO had this to say about the parents' attendance:

*I think what else has been very revealing is that actually through no fault of their own but just through circumstances the amount of times that they forget or can't make a specific appointment makes you realise how adaptable you have to be to reach the families, I mean for example Ed's mum physically can't remember anything, she just can't, she can't. [The Story Links teacher] rings her up on a Monday and she'll ring her again on a Tuesday and she'll say "Oh I completely forgot...And this I've known in the past but it's never been quite so clear- but having that focus for that period of weeks.*

SENCO

She also felt that this group of parents particularly needed support to engage with their child's learning:

*I don't think that they could have done it without that level of input and that to me is why a lot of the children are not making the progress, it's not that the parents don't care it's that they're absolutely swamped... trying to keep going.*

SENCO

#### 4.4.2 Engaging parents who struggle with their own literacy

The poor level of parental literacy in the target group (see para 2.3.3 and appendix 6) extended to many siblings and wider family members. This was challenging for some of the attending parents, as engagement with the Story Links programme made such difficulties, which hitherto perhaps had been kept private, visible. However many of them spoke openly about what the lack of literacy meant for them. John's Mum observed

*His Dad would probably not be able to read these books (basic readers) either... Actually saying that my daughter and I were both um dyslexic... Yes I struggle with mine but I do plod on, but my daughter has all sorts of help at college and things because of hers.*

The husband of the couple who attended the sessions spoke about his own 'trouble with reading and writing' and the reason for his wife's basic literacy:

*My wife is self-taught, my wife didn't go to school from the age of 14. I mean if I got a Council bill I pass it to the wife straight away. Unfortunately she can only read certain words like 'court case.'*

Rosie's Dad

When his daughter faced difficulties with learning to read, it reminded him of his own experience:

*She's got her eyes. She does what I used to do when I was a child because I remember my mum smacking me round the head and saying "Will you concentrate for God's sake, stop looking round the room," and I could see that going on, I didn't smack Rosie round the head but I could see Rosie do the exact same thing looking round the room... So obviously you do pass your demons down to your children but since this reading thing she focuses at the words, don't she (to wife)?*

Despite his own poor literacy he had felt comfortable in the Story Links sessions and thought had helped his daughter not to repeat his own pattern of behaviour in school:

*She's really brought us together with the reading because obviously like where I can't read and write properly I shy away from it, if you can't do something you don't really, and your member of staff made us feel so relaxed and very at ease... if someone had done this for me at school, they just put me in the back of the class and said like he's the comical person, you stay there... I always used to crack bad jokes because I couldn't read and write properly so my way out was humour and Rosie started to go that way... Until this lady come along and we started doing these stories I could see Rosie going that way.*

In Beth's case neither of her parents nor most of her older siblings were literate. However, despite these difficulties the Story Links teacher said that Mum remained 'very positive' in the sessions and 'quite apologetic' that she didn't actually do any reading at home. He also recalled ways in which Mum, despite her own problems with literacy, had still tried to encourage Beth with her reading:

*What she did say was that she and Beth went to...a newsagent or a bookshop and Beth got a book that she read to the rabbit. So this is all those kinds of very early pre-reading types of activities, and she probably had the book upside down and that sort of thing but she actually read a story to the rabbit. There was once when one of the older children read to Beth as well but only once.*

*Beth's SL teacher*

#### 4.4.3 Parental engagement with the story metaphor

##### Parents' understanding of the use of story metaphor to support emotional development

Underlying the theory of the Story Links programme is the intent for the teachers and parents to understand the emotional issues the children presented through the story metaphor. Most of the Story Links teachers reported that parents did recognise how the metaphor of the created stories reflected emotional and behavioural issues. However, it was evident that some parents were initially more able to do this than others. Some, like Mark's Mum, were able to immediately understand the way in which story metaphor could be used to obliquely address emotional and behavioural issues:

*She did say once that Mark was arguing a lot with his sister at home and she'd like to do something about that and then another time she said could she start the story because she felt that Mark had such a lot of emotional pulls in his life and so I did rather wonder how she was going to start the story but actually she kept it in the dragon mode.*

*Mark's SL teacher*

Others, like Aaron's Mum, gradually became more aware of this possibility as the weeks progressed:

*It was clearly quite a new thing for her... initially she just was interested in what I said about what I'd be thinking about for the next week or the next starter. But then she, there came a point when she suddenly saw what was happening...and she gave me three suggestions of issues at home that she wanted to address.*

*Aaron's SL teacher*

Aaron's mother, herself, described the stories as being 'geared' to 'things at home, and behaviour and his sister and things like that and some for school and turn taking and that kind of stuff.'

However, for some of the parents their thinking seems to have been more about connecting to the child's external world rather than their internal emotional states. For instance, Pete's mum, although reporting that she and the Story Links teacher would 'have a little meeting for about five minutes beforehand to discuss where we go to next', had introduced ideas relating more to his everyday interests such as his birthday, table tennis and card games which he loved, than his internal emotional world:

In the case of the couple who attended, the Story Links teacher felt they did understand the metaphor but that this had presented some difficulty for her as they seemed, at times, to use it to process their own relationship rather than to think about their daughter's emotional issues. In fact the father, who had recently had conflicts with neighbours, actually made a comment to this effect:

*I mean if you read in between the lines of the stories you can see there's adult problems and dilemmas in there, like with Colin the Chameleon stealing the dinner... off the windowsill.*

*Rosie's dad*

(See para 4.4.7 for further comments on working with a couple)

### **Parental anxiety as an obstacle to the child's expression within the story metaphor**

In two cases, the Story Links teachers reported that the parent tried to control or amend the child's contribution to the joint story. This had been quite an issue initially with Fred's mother but when it was pointed out to her, she was able to alter her approach:

*She was sort of putting words into his mouth, she kept interrupting sometimes [when he was speaking]. So [SL teacher] had a quiet word and said 'Let's just, let the flow go and [TA] and myself will read it back' and she did, she took it on board.*

*Fred's TA*

The Story Links teacher in this case added that Fred's Mum, like two other parents, had a tendency to use her contribution to save the situation in the story rather than developing some deeper, emotional understanding within the metaphor. Again, as with the issue of interrupting her son, it seemed mum was quite receptive to 'a bit of gentle guidance [from the TA] as to how to contribute to the story':

*'She did admit that... I think she found it hard particularly when the story was about if Fred had said something about Mum. I suppose that is difficult. If there's a story about when you've lost Mum I suppose you'd want to prove that you're a good mum and that you don't lose your child and you know you want to stick up for yourself so I can understand how difficult it could be for her.'*

*Fred's SL teacher*

Here is the co-created story, referred to in the above comment, where the main character, Sammy Squirrel, loses his Mum:

Sammy the squirrel was by a tree feeling very angry. Sammy had lost his mum and could not see her. An acorn fell on his head, he wished his mum were there to kiss his head better.

Sammy was getting more and more angry because his mum had left him. He hit the tree with his paw again and again but did not feel his paw hurting him. Sammy could not feel the pain. He felt angry and very, scared.

He went up and up the tree to look for his mum. Up and up he went but he still could not see his mum.

Sammy hit the tree again and again. Poor Sammy! His paw was now hurting. Then below him he saw his mum and he cried with joy. He ran down the tree and gave his mum a BIG, BIG HUG.



In fact it was clear, from what the Story Links teacher says below that the pupil as well as the mother was aware that his contribution to the story related to his own experience:

*And in that story, afterwards Fred said "Well I did lose you Mum didn't I once?" And he told us the whole situation, I think it was in a shop wasn't it and you know he went one way and she went the other, and I mean it happens to us all, and she did feel uncomfortable about that and what he was going to say.*

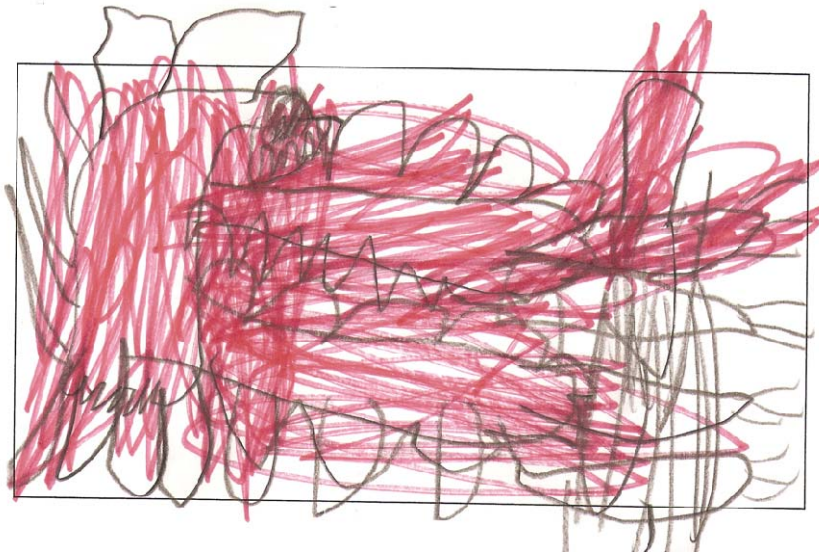
*Fred's SL teacher*

#### ***Parental anxiety about violence in the story metaphor***

Two of the parents appeared to have been shocked by the violence of some of their child's contributions to the story line. For instance, Ian's Mum, when pointing to a story in which Ian's contribution was that the main character killed someone, said *'when that came out of Ian's mouth you just think "Oh my gosh!" what is he thinking?'*

Here is the opening story of the story she referred to:





**Story LinksT:** *Dino the dragon was in his garden. He was angry.*

**Ian:** *He had killed a man. He wanted to plant a tree but did not know how to do it without burning the tree.*

**Mum:** *He was sad because he had killed a man and did not know how to plant a tree without burning it.*

The Story Links teacher also remembered that Mum had been quite *'anxious to sort of temper the story a little bit'* at this point and described how she encouraged her to accept whatever Ian contributed without feeling she had to put it right.

*After Ian had started that first story with the man getting killed, she wanted [to intervene] which I guess is fair enough. I mean I tried to explain that it had to be what he wanted in the story. I didn't want her to feel that she'd got to make everything wonderful that if people were getting killed or whatever that she suddenly had to somehow make it all right.*

When Ian, himself was asked why he liked this story, which he had chosen as one of his favourites, he replied simply, 'I like people dying'. The teacher, while honouring the child's contribution, nevertheless also tried to 'pull the story around as it as it went' in order to bring it to a more positive resolution. This is evident in the final part of the story where the emphasis is on planting a tree to commemorate the man who had been killed by Dino and on buying a water pistol, which can be seen as a metaphor for a means to quell the dragon's fiery anger, rather than on killing:

He liked big green trees best so he went to ask his mum if he could buy a tree.

He went with mum and bought a tall tree in one shop.

It was a Christmas tree.

He went into a shop and bought a water pistol.

Dino and his mum took the tree home and it was so tall it went through the ceiling.

Dino did not burn it because he had the water pistol.

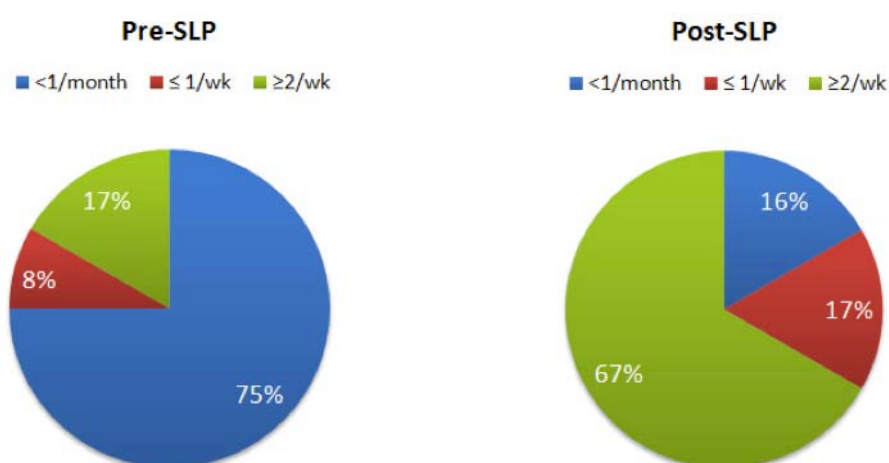
In her final interview Mum now seemed to be aware of the need to accept Ian's contributions and was also able to relate the metaphor in later stories to Ian's feeling state saying *'I suppose he expressed himself naturally'*. The Story Links teacher was impressed that despite Mum's initial anxiety about Ian's contributions, *'she did engage in the stories and I think she quite enjoyed it in the end.'*

#### 4.4.4 Engagement of parent in hearing child read at home

##### Changes in home reading patterns

As shown in Figure 11, prior to the intervention only two of the parents heard their child read at least twice a week, with two-thirds of the parents saying that they heard their child read less than once a month.

Figure 11: Frequency of reading to parent at home pre and post Story Links



This improved dramatically during the Story Links programme with eight parents hearing their child read at home at least twice a week. Of the four pupils whose reading patterns did not change, two of these were already reading at least twice a week before the programme and these were also the pupils with the highest initial reading score on the NARA (see 4.5.5 below). Just over half of the parents heard their child read the stories at least twice a week; five of these had said that they did not hear their child read at all before the Story Links programme. In all these cases these, frequencies were corroborated by the pupils in separate interviews.

In the case of the couple there was a discrepancy between what each parent said regarding frequency of reading at home. The mother said they never heard their daughter read prior to the intervention but the father said they heard her once a week. In another case there was a discrepancy between what the parent and child said about reading frequency. In both cases the lower frequency was included in the data as it was felt that the discrepancies may have been due to the fact that some parents feel guilty about not hearing their child read (see also Individual Profile B).

#### Reasons for lack of reading prior to Story Links programme

The majority of the parents spoke about their child's reluctance to sit down and engage with reading. The following comments were representative of the group:

*What I find with Pete is he won't sit down and read.*

*Pete's Mum*

*He doesn't want to do it. To try to actually get him to read a book...*

*Harry's Mum*

In some cases where the parent had insisted the child read at home this often became a cause of conflict, with the child unable to cope with being corrected:

*The trouble is I can sit and read with him but then he gets stroppy with me... he doesn't like me to, you know to correct him.*

*Ross's foster carer*

For some parents, like Harry's Mum, this conflict had discouraged them from reading with their child:

*Sometimes I think should I back off about his reading because rather than saying to him all the time have you done it, and he'll think 'I'm not going to do[it]'*

Only one parent said they heard their child read once a week or more and this was the pupil who had the highest initial reading score. However, even this parent said: *'It can very quickly become a chore for him so... I feel I have to tread very delicately to stop him feeling demoralised.'*

For a discussion of the pupils' engagement with reading at home during the Story Links programme (see 4.5.1 below).

#### 4.4.5 Parent confidence and skills - and lack of them

A majority of the parents felt they lacked the skills to support their child in learning to read. Clearly the three attending parents with poor literacy themselves fell into this category but a number of the other parents lacked confidence in supporting their child's reading. For instance, Ed's mother who said that, although reading was her 'thing', she still didn't feel confident to help her children with this. She spoke about previously trying to support Ed's older sister with reading and that this had led to emotional clashes:

*'I got very, very frustrated with her not understanding and it actually was very detrimental to her because I was very frustrated with her and that's left me with a, I don't know what, a block or something.'*

In supporting Ed she had become 'very wary about [it], I'm worried about doing more damage because I know what I'm like- I tend to get quite frustrated.'

John's Mum spoke in particular about her confusion about different approaches to teaching reading:

*Sometimes you feel that you're teaching him the wrong theories...So it's no good.... my two big kids all learnt letter land, and... John did phonetics and I couldn't get phonetics.*

### Learning from teachers about reading

Some parents spoke about how the sessions had helped them to develop their own teaching skills. Ian's Mum was one of those who talked about this in some detail:

*It was very interesting to see how [his SL teacher] taught him and it helped me because she would prompt in a certain way and we covered up each line so he could just see that line and if he followed it with a pen or a finger, so of course I learned that... and also the prompting to sound out the words...It has been fantastic... because I'm not a teacher, I'm just a mum, but to see a teacher in action it helped me.*

Several of the parents in the post interviews expressed an interest in finding out more about how children learn to read. For instance, Harry's Mum wondered why her son could copy-write a text but not be able to read it back and thought *'It would be interesting to talk to [the SENCO] about that a bit more actually.'*

### Gaining confidence in storymaking

A number of parents also mentioned their initial anxiety about participating in the story-making activity. However, all reported that they had become more confident as the sessions progressed:

*I struggle wondering about how to put a story together, so it's kind of a mental block for me. So for me it's been a great experience because I feel I've actually gained a bit of confidence myself.*

Mark's mum

*It's hard for me to put my brain in gear so sometimes I was a bit stumped but he came up a gear - it was handy with all four people in there and seeing which way the story went.*

Ed's Mum

*I felt embarrassed. Yeah, especially the first two, because the first story line was already thought up and it was emotion... and when you're put on the spot like that I found it very difficult to think in his language... I was OK after that.*

Ian's NH Mum

### Parental self-esteem

A number of teachers and the parents themselves spoke about the increase in parents' general self-esteem. One of the Story Links teachers spoke particularly about Lisa's mother, whose attendance the school had initially been most concerned about *'because she kept coming up with reasons why she couldn't come'*. However, in his opinion, she had *'blossomed'* and of the four parents attending Story Links at her school, she was *'the one who has always remembered'*. *In fact, he thought that 'the mother has changed more than Lisa.'* His observations about Lisa's mother were supported by the SENCO who thought her confidence to establish appropriate boundaries for Lisa had also improved:

*It's been really positive for her (Lisa's) mum to come in, really positive... also I would say she's putting more boundaries down with Lisa than perhaps she didn't have before...Lisa would kind of butt in or change the subject, and now she's saying 'No, no Lisa, this is my bit now, you need to listen,' and she's doing that a lot more, which is great.*

SENCO

One Story Links teacher also talked about how important it was for the parents' self-esteem to see that their child was achieving something in school, as they could easily feel that their child's difficulties reflected on them:

*I suppose it was in a way building up the positive side of her son, which actually I think probably, because she'd been criticised quite a lot, well not her personally, but he'd been in trouble such a lot I felt it was quite important.*

Mark's SL teacher

#### 4.4.6 Working with a couple

The only couple who took part in the Story Links evaluation programme presented a particular issue for this programme in that the focus on their child frequently shifted to a focus on their relationship. They were keen to take part to help their daughter, Rosie, to improve her reading. According to the SENCO Rosie's emotional and behavioural issues were *'all internal'* and added that she seemed *'terribly insecure'*. She self-harmed by scratching her face and pulling out her hair; in fact the Story Links teacher said, *'she wears a sort of red bandanna because she's quite bald.'* Rosie had never been excluded by the school but sometimes she failed to come into school because she *'felt upset'*.

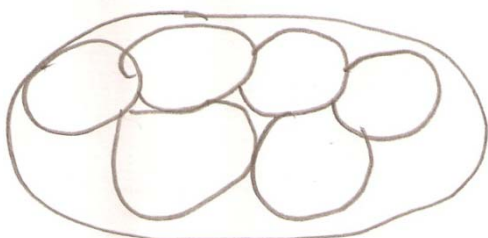
The parents attended eight out of the ten sessions together. The father, who had a physical disability, was unable to read and the mother had just low level literacy skills. At first the Story Links teacher thought it was *'quite nice'* that both parents wanted to come to the sessions. However, she soon found the dynamic in the sessions quite difficult to handle. She said that the main difficulty was that often the father *'dominated the story so it didn't matter what you started with, he would take it off on his own track'*.

While she felt that Rosie's parents were aware of the way story metaphor could be used to reflect feelings, she thought that the ideas introduced by the father were more often focused on his own feelings and the dynamic between him and his wife, than on the feelings of his daughter. She talked about a particular story where this had been evident:

*We had one story, which was about Lily the Lizard who had heard good news. So Rosie said the good news was that she and Brian had decided that they could afford to have a baby... then he comes in and he says on one of his goes... [Brian] looked at these eggs, which Lily had lovingly laid and decided that they were alligator eggs and that he now had the proof that Lily had been cheating on him... Rosie's mother's go was something like 'Well he had another think coming if he thought she was going to have six (more babies to look after), she decided to put them in a basket and go and throw all of them over a cliff.'*

However, the Story Links teacher had managed to write this story up sensitively, omitting the rejecting attitude to the baby reptiles. Her final version was as follows:

### Lily and Brian Make Plans



Lily was sitting in the back of her cave. She was feeling excited. She had heard some good news. The good news was that Brian said they could have a baby. Lily dug a smooth, round hole in the sand at the back of the cave. She laid some round white eggs. She covered them with the clean sand. Lily counted the round white eggs. There were six! Lily said that they would need lots of cots and blankets and toys for the new babies.

The smooth eggs began to crack and hatch. Lily and Brian looked at the baby lizards. They looked liked alligators. They had big teeth and big eyes. 'What will we do with such big babies?' asked Lily and Brian.

Lily and Brian decided to make a plan. Lily was clever. She loved the babies. They decided to keep the babies until they found a new home.

The Story Links teacher went on to reflect that, as Rosie was clearly very anxious, the metaphor of *'throwing the eggs over the cliff edge'* was *'not helpful really'* as it could be construed as rejecting of the young ones in a family.

Although Dad had been very positive about the sessions, she felt that he was not *'able to put himself into her [his daughter's] shoes at all'*. This was supported by comments from the TA who said that *'sometimes it was quite difficult to keep the focus on Rosie'* because of Dad. The Story LinksT also mentioned that Dad was often *'more affectionate towards his wife than his daughter in the sessions.'*



The Story Links teacher concluded by saying, that she *'just wasn't experienced enough to have both [parents]'* and that *'when we do the next round we're going to be much more specific about that [working with just one parent].'*

#### 4.4.7 What about the dads?

Mothers were the predominant parent attending the sessions with their children. Only one father attended the Story Links programme and this was as part of the couple discussed above. In fact, eight of the pupils (all boys except one) did not live with their biological father (see *Appendix 6: Overview of the pupils presenting issues and their family context*).

It was clear from what both pupils and parents said that many of the pupils had complex feelings about their relationship with their fathers, whether present or absent. For some, like Ian, there was anxiety around conflict:

*They clash... my husband hasn't any patience, and Ian hasn't either so I'm the go-between, the mediator, the peacemaker yes.*

*Ian's Mum*

For others, particularly for those not in contact with their biological father, there was a sense of abandonment or, as in the case of Fred, confusion:

*Fred's got a different dad to the others [his siblings]... I think he lived with him when he was much younger, but then says, I don't see my dad at all and I've got a new dad... so that must be quite tricky for him, it doesn't seem clear who his dad is, his (step) dad who is black African is his new dad.*

*Fred's SL teacher*

In addition, there seemed to be few positive male role models with good literacy for those boys who were in contact with their father: four fathers were illiterate and one step-father could not read English. Many of the boys' relationships with their fathers appeared ambivalent as often the pupils also 'idolised' them:

*Dad, granddad and either an elder brother or an uncle don't read or write and Mum says [Harry] seems to idolise these male figures of the family.*

*Harry's SL teacher*

#### Including the absent father in the story

An interesting development in a number of cases was the way in which the father, though absent from the sessions, came to be represented in the actual stories through a father figure character. Pete was one of several pupils whose stories included a central father figure character and his case illustrates this point well.

#### *Pete's story: a yearning for Dad's attention*

Pete lived with both his biological parents but his mother said that he and his dad had *'quite a conflict in their relationship...because they're very similar'* and that they were *'like two peas in a pod really.'* She talked about the ambivalence in the father/son relationship saying that while they *'do rub off badly on each other'*, Pete *'actually adores his dad'* and was definitely a *'man's*



*boy*. She then spoke about how Pete's feelings towards his dad had been reflected in the metaphor of some of his stories about Gordon the Gorilla. In one of these a gorilla called Big George who, like Pete, has no friends to play with and keeps 'picking on' other gorillas. The story continues:

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."



The Story Links teacher also highlighted this story and said that in the session, there had been a bit of a joke between Pete and his Mum because Godzilla is what they sometimes called his dad at home. Mum was able to reflect with some insight on this story:

*He knows it himself because there is a few problems with him and his dad... he always wants to do things with his dad and of course his dad always can't.*

The Story Links teacher had suggested a possible resolution to the conflict in the story with the following ending:

Big George's dad saw him. He called him over to him, "I decided to take the day off to buy a skateboard for you. Come over and see it." Big George was so happy.

Mum said that she was keen for his Dad to read the stories but this had not happened as yet:

*I've got them all at home. I keep saying to his dad to have a look at them but...I wonder if he realises what we've actually, I mean I have sort of explained it to him but whether he was sort of listening at the time I don't know.*

### **Mark's story: anxiety around parental separation**

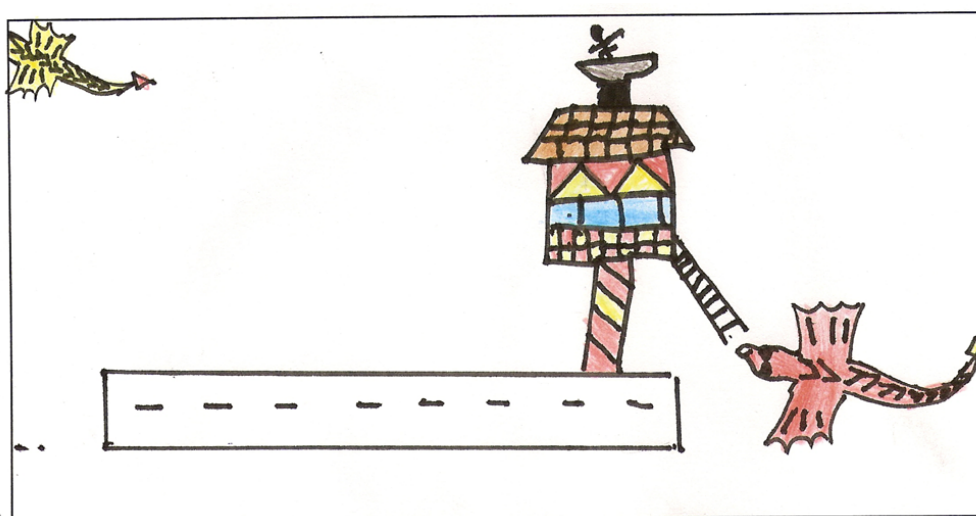
In this second case, a mother, who appeared to have had a difficult separation from her husband, came in one week with a story opening that introduced a father figure for the first time in the sequence of stories. Her son spent about a third of his time at his Dad's and the rest with her. The Story Links teacher recounted how a few weeks into the programme Mum had come in saying '*I'd like to begin the story today because I think he's got these emotional pulls in his life and I think it might be a good idea.*' Her opening went as follows:

Long ago there was a dragon called Fly. One day he was asked to do something very special by his daddy dragon. That was for Fly to look after the treasure that his daddy had been guarding whilst he himself went on holiday.

The Story Links teacher recalled that Mark followed this with:

"Yes", said Fly and jumped up into the air. His daddy warned him, "tomorrow you'll have to begin guarding it".

The Story Links teacher said '*That was all he said for that bit which was unusual for him because he usually rambled off.*' The story continued with the daddy going to the dragon runway by a control tower and taking off as illustrated in his picture below.



The next time the group met, Mark had said '*I don't want to do another story about a dragon; they're too difficult to draw.*' But the Story Links teacher pointed out that '*actually it's not difficult at all, I mean what he's done is easy [to draw].*' It appears that to reconnect with the theme of this story again may have been emotionally overwhelming in that the feelings aroused by the daddy dragon who has taken off may have been too close to the feelings he had about his father leaving the family home.

#### Actual involvement of fathers

In two cases the Story Links programme led to fathers, both of whom were separated from their wives, coming into their son's school for the first time. A few weeks into sessions with Aaron, the story began to be sent to his father who he visited at weekends. Aaron's Mum reported that he would hear Aaron read the stories twice and that '*his Dad enjoyed it because it meant that he could feel a bit more included.*' Aaron's father, who had never been in school before, then attended the school disco with his son soon after the Story Links sessions finished.

John's parents were also separated. While John's dad did not hear his son read when he visited, as his own literacy was too poor, he was the reason given by John for his motivation to learn to read: '*If your dad can't read, and you're going somewhere, you can at least read it for him.*' In

the initial session John who was effectively a carer for his Mum, was keen that his Dad might come if his Mum couldn't make it: *'Well, I don't know if my Mum can make it most times... Or my Dad could come. Yeah, my Dad, my Dad hasn't ever been to my school.'*

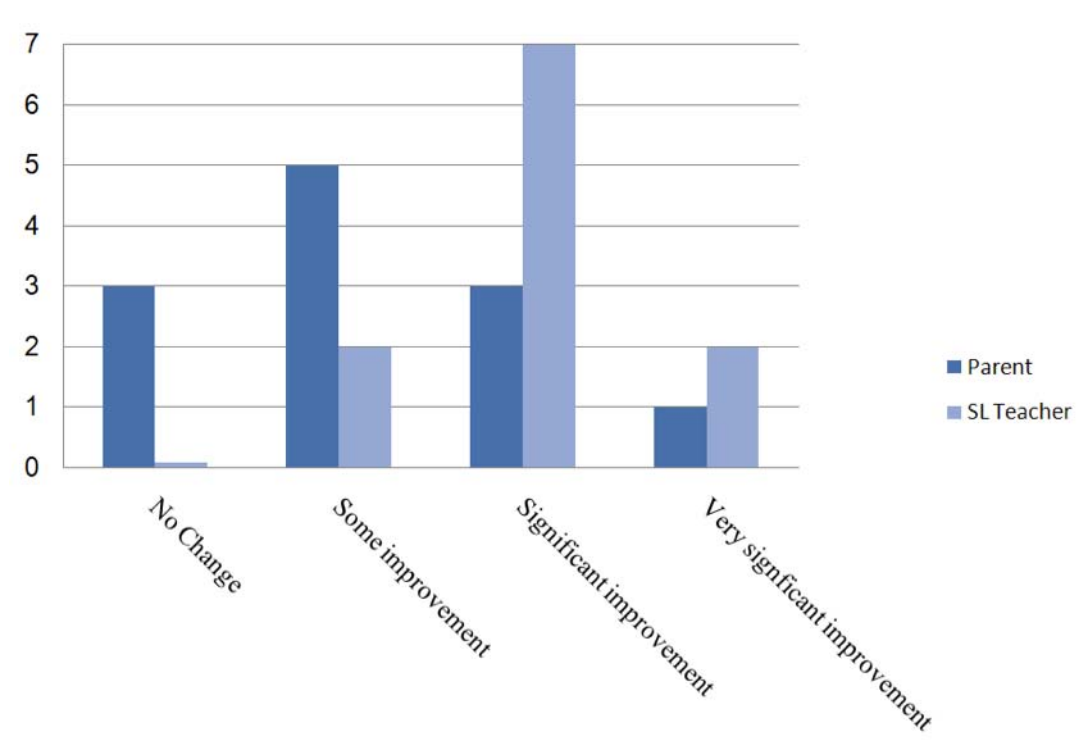
John's father, like Aaron's, also visited the school for the first time during the Story Links sessions to discuss his son's progress with teachers.

However, in a third case, Harry's mother had asked his separated father to attend the week she was on holiday but in fact he had not shown up.

#### 4.4.8 Impact on Home / School Relationship

Three-quarters of the parents and all the teachers thought the home/school relationship had improved to some degree during the Story Links programme, as shown in Figure 12. It is interesting to note that in comparison to the overall benefit of Story Links programme (see 4.7.2 below) where the parents rated the benefit higher than the teachers, with respect to the home/school relationship, it is the teachers who felt there was most improvement.

**Figure 12: Parent' and Story Links Teachers' Views on Impact on Home/School Relationship**



#### Specific observations of the impact on the home/school relationship

##### *i) Some relationships good already*

The three parents who chose the category 'no change', all said this was because their relationship with the school was 'good already' as did two of the five parents who chose 'some improvement' category. Despite this claim, this judgement was supported by only one of the

Story Links teachers. This may have been because the parents did not want to acknowledge that their past relationship with the school had been difficult.

### *ii) Turning around difficult relationships*

From comments made by the teachers at least half the parents before the start of the Story Links programme had had either very little contact with the school (also see SENCO comments in para 4.4.1) or a confrontational relationship, often described euphemistically as a little 'tricky': *'When T was ill we couldn't contact (Mum). Never seen dad'. (Aaron's classteacher); 'I think she felt quite defensive and that the school wasn't doing enough.'* (Mark's classteacher)

Two parents were open about the difficult relationship they previously had with the school and both thought that the Story Links programme had helped turned this around:

*John's got behaviour problems so my interaction with the school was horrible all the time. The only interaction was "John's been bad, this has happened, that's happened" and that's the only links I've had with the school....now it's nice to look forward to coming in, in the afternoon, we all sit down, we talk about bits and pieces, and John glows and picks up his reading and is eager to tell us his story.*

*John's Mum*

*We actually enjoy coming into the school now... I used to hate this place. I still don't love it, (but) I do enjoy Tuesdays (Story Links day).*

*Rosie's Dad*

### *iii) Engagement in a wider discussion relating to the child's welfare*

In another case where there was a 'tricky' relationship with the parent, the SENCO sought specifically to use the intervention to provide an opportunity to discuss the child's general welfare with his mother.

*'She's engaging which is good; there are some issues I need to tackle her on as well, which I feel a bit wary... But it's just trying to get him in first of all and sort of get that relationship established and then we can start, and we're leading this sort of group so I can do the other stuff [general welfare issues]...From the past we've learned that she can be quite volatile'.*

*Fred's SENCO*

This seems to have worked because Fred's Mum was one of the parents who said there had been a *'very significant improvement'* in the home/school relationship, attributing this to the fact *'that I got to know teachers, I suppose. Normally I'd just drop them off and then pick them up [referring to other siblings as well] at the end of the day.'* This improved relationship with the school was supported by the SENCO and the Story Links teacher, both of whom thought that the major benefit of Story Links for Fred had been the home-school links that had developed.

### *iv) Helping parents re-frame their own experience of school*

There were other similar examples of how the Story Links programme had improved home school relationships where previously there had been difficulties but this next observation suggests that the intervention had another effect - in helping a parent realise that the school experience for her son might be different to her own:

*She is the sort of parent who still thinks back to her own experiences isn't she and thinks that school is a bad place...And so 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.*

*Harry's SENCO*

#### **v) Role of the TA in supporting home /school relationship**

The TAs link with the child also helped to improve home –school relationships with parents in forming a connection as part of a team where the parents could see that the school and they were working together for the benefit of the child. As Lisa's TA commented, *'I haven't worked with parents much before... it's been nice to be able to see they want to help as well'.*

#### **Maintaining home/school relationship post-Story Links**

This improved home/school relationship engendered by the Story Links programme seemed to have such a benefit for the child that at least two of the parents expressed an intention to continue to come into school after the programme finished. One was the parent of Mark:

*I'm slightly more in touch with the school and having been here a little bit more and seeing how you do things...It has been interesting, to the extent that perhaps I can do something else... either with Mark or I could come in to read to the children... I'm interested in keeping in touch.*

*Mark mum*

The second parent, who in the pre-interview had indicated that it was *'very hard'* being Pete's Mum, ' and that she found him *'24/7'*, was surprised at how much he had appreciated her coming into school. She had continued to come into school each week, once Story Links had finished at the time previously used for the sessions.

Several parents expressed regret that the sessions were ending and some were keen to do more sessions with their child:

*'I'll probably miss it now'.*

*Lisa's Mum*

*'Actually I'd do it again.*

*Ian's Mum*

*'I wish he could do it again for another ten weeks. [laughing]*

*Ed's Mum*

One seemed rather annoyed that the sessions had finished, saying:

*I'm concerned that this is now stopping...In terms of I'm coming to school every week, we'll deal with all sorts of issues...Not only the reading and, and that's all going to stop... that does worry me...I don't, I can't see of doing this by myself.*

*John's Mum*

Two parents were keen to do the Story Links programme with siblings:

*I did ask if I could do it with my son*

*Rosie's dad*

I've got a younger one as well so if it ever came up again I'd like to do it with him.

*Pete's Mum*

## 4.5 *Impact on pupils' engagement with learning*

### 4.5.1 **Impact on pupils' engagement with reading at home**

As detailed in para 4.4.4, the frequency of reading with their child at home improved during the programme. When pupils had read twice a week at home, parents thought their child's reading had improved and all particularly highlighted the child's improved attitude to reading:

*What's changed is that he now happily picks up a book and starts reading... he knows what it's about and he gets the enjoyment out of it. He knows what it says... if you see things around, even on a billboard or whatever, in a glance he has read what's there, he's understood what it said... it could be several lines but in no time he has read it and has understood what it said.*

*Mark's Mum*

*It was more of a chore before wasn't it (to wife)... Yeah. It was like she-you made her, you had to make her read... But ever since she's done this reading and writing course thing it's more a thing she has to do to herself. She loves it, she wants to do it.*

*Rosie's Dad*

*He gets stuck on words but then he asks for help. But it's the fact that he now wants to and it's like he's clicked with being able to retain a story...and putting it together in his head.*

*Ed's Mum*

(See also individual pupil profiles A & B)

Ian's mother said how previously he *'wouldn't read at all because even the books he was given here he wouldn't read to me. It was embarrassment, it really was, he didn't want to. It was frustration I suppose as well.'*

However, he had started reading to her twice a week during the Story Links programme and she had been quite *'amazed'* at how he had started to want to read at home. In fact she got quite emotional in the interview as she remembered hearing him trying to read on his own for the first time:



*The second week I was amazed, it was 6 o'clock in the morning which is his usual time and I heard him talking to himself which he normally does and I listened and he was, you could tell, he was reading. And he was reading a Doctor Seuss book... So I left it a few minutes and then I went into his room and I said to him, "Are you reading?" And he said "Yes, I'm trying to, I'm missing out the words I don't know." And I said "That's fine, fantastic." And he has never ever done that before... I was choked. It was wonderful... it was amazing, it really was... So he's enjoyed it and it's made a difference to him, he's started to sound out, and he's also chosen to get interested and more confident.*

Ian's Mum

Despite this improvement she still had to be careful to *'to pick the moment'* to ask him to read to her.

In two cases parents had heard their child read for just one or two weeks but had not been able to maintain the routine despite the encouragement from school. Fred's mother was one of these and the Story Links teacher said that Mum was 'honest' and would say *'No, we haven't done it this week'*. One week the Story Links teacher emphasised to Mum how important it was to hear her child read and then *'that week when he did it at home, he read it all fantastically.... it made such a difference.'* But she added:

*It was [only] that one week where we saw that glimmer... we saw the impact of that one week and it was just he came in and... obviously there were some words that he couldn't do but he could, he just read it...It was just like another child...and it is a shame because we prayed so much, hoping that she would really take on board the impact that it had had.*

Fred's SL teacher

After this one week, the Story Links teacher said there was *'always an excuse'* from Fred's mother although she had said that Fred had read to his brother; but Fred didn't seem to recall this in his separate interview. However, despite this, Mum did attend every one of the 10 sessions.

In contrast to Fred's mother, John's mother had started hear her son read every day during the programme. While this had mainly been positive the Story Links teacher expressed a concern about Mum, who began devising alphabets and highlighting systems, *'expecting too much from him in terms of reading.'* (See pupil profile A for more details)

#### 4.5.2 The significance of pupils' ownership of the stories

Ownership of the stories was a crucial motivation for the pupils to engage in reading the stories. The intervention was designed to particularly foster pupils' emotional investment, and hence interest, in the co-created stories.

The majority of the parents thought that the 'ownership' pupils felt towards the stories had indeed been a significant factor in their improved engagement with reading. For instance, Ross's foster mother who had previously been so concerned at how *'stroppy'* he would get when asked to read to her, said that his *'stroppiness'* had been entirely absent when reading one of the Story Links stories to her at home because *'he had something to do with it':*



*'He helped do it didn't he and it was all his effort and I think also he knew what it was about as well, he knew more about the story before he started reading it, where I think a fresh book he doesn't know, and I think it's different, I think it's because he's enjoyed doing this.*

*Ross's foster carer*

Other parents also mentioned the child's ownership of the stories as being a key factor in their interest in reading them:

*It was our story, it was our club, our book club, so yes that ownership of his story worked yes.*

*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*

### 4.5.3 What got in the way of reading at home during the Story Links programme?

There were a number of issues that were mentioned by pupils, parents and teachers, as to what got in the way of the pupil reading to their parent at home.

#### **Demands of siblings**

One of these was that siblings had disturbed the home reading sessions. Mark, although he did read to his mother twice a week, said *'I don't really like it, I like reading to myself... because I've got my sister's scream in the background.'*

For Beth, her siblings also seemed to undermine all efforts to support her reading at home:

*We've had considerable trouble when we've sent the story home with her. It's things like the story went under the fridge, the dog ate the story, one of the older boys tore the story up... actually I decided in the end to get her a little tape recorder.*

*Beth's SL teacher*

However, even the tape recorder provided was not a solution as one of the brothers then taped over the stories. This case showed the commitment of the Story Links teacher who then took time to re-tape all the stories *'and then seal it so they couldn't tape over the stories.'*

#### **No time**

Parental availability for reading at home was an issue that affected several of the group. For instance Pete said, *'I don't read stories (to Mum) at home, it's too busy. She's too busy, ironing, washing, but I read to her in sessions'*. It seemed that Pete's M. was more able to hear her child read within the school environment as she continued coming into school to hear him read each Friday after the Story Links sessions finished. However she did mention that at home *'what I find he's doing now is he likes reading the newspaper... he actually sits there and starts reading it'*.

Ed's Mum who ran a small holding also said that they had *'struggled to find time at home'* because of their *'hectic lives'* which had recently included *'the lambing kicking in'*. She said how she would *'crawl into bed and I'm like 'oh damn we haven't done the reading.'"*

Lack of time was also highlighted by Fred's Mum as the reason for not doing the reading at home:

*It's all so time-consuming because sometimes I don't finish work till seven at night, so by the time I get home he's sort of getting ready for bed and I'd rather he wasn't sat up reading stories all night.*

*Fred's Mum*

Fred himself also spoke about this, saying: *'Me and my mum didn't got time together much...Sometimes her had to work. And sometimes her too tired.'*

#### Parents' copy of the story not reaching home in time

A few of the parents, mentioned that some weeks the story had not reached them in time to do the reading. One SL teacher had overcome these difficulties by emailing the story home which the parent said had worked very well.

#### 4.5.4 Impact on pupils' engagement with reading in school

As described in section 4.5.1 above, the majority of parents thought their child had showed an improved willingness to engage with reading at home. The majority of the Story Links teachers and many of the classteachers also mentioned how pupils had begun to be more interested in reading:

*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.*

*John's SL teacher*

*He was ill yesterday and couldn't come to school, so I said what did you do and he said "I lay in bed and I read a book." And he sort of showed me how thick it was...and I thought oh gosh, what a change because certainly...in July he never could have read a book.*

*Mark's SL teacher*

*He now takes pride in sharing his reading and literacy work.*

*Pete's class teacher*

#### 4.5.5 Impact on pupils' standardised reading scores

##### Standardised reading score: Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA)

There was minimal progress in the pupils' reading ability as measured by the NARA for the group as a whole as shown in Figure 13 which details the scores for accuracy and comprehension pre and post Story Links. (Results in red indicate an increase in pupil's score and those in blue a decrease.) Only one pupil, Mark, made significant progress for both accuracy and comprehension and this was the pupil with the highest initial NARA score.

##### Analysis of NARA results

##### Pre intervention: Accuracy and comprehension

Two-thirds (eight) of the pupils failed to score at all (i.e. below 6.01) on the NARA scale for both accuracy and comprehension pre intervention.

### **Post intervention: Accuracy**

Two of the eight pupils who had recorded no score pre intervention managed to just score on the NARA at 6.01 (68% confidence band 5.07 to 6.08) and 6.03 (68% confidence band 5.10 to 6.10). Two of the four pupils who had scored on the NARA in the pre test increased their reading age by 3 months and 11 months respectively, with the remaining two pupils showing no change in their reading accuracy.

### **Post Story Links programme: Comprehension**

Three of the eight pupils who had recorded no score for comprehension pre intervention were on the NARA scale for comprehension post intervention with scores of 6.01 (68% confidence band 5.08 to 6.04), 6.01 and 6.07 (68% confidence band 6.04 to 6.09). Of the four pupils who scored on the NARA pre test, one pupil showed no change, one showed a minimal increase of one month and two showed significant improvements in comprehension of 11 and 24 months respectively. (See Neale Analysis of Reading Ability Neale Analysis of Reading Ability Neale Analysis of Reading Ability methodology Neale Analysis of Reading Ability Neale Analysis of Reading Ability Neale Analysis of Reading Ability for discussion of 68% confidence band).

### **Standardised score and percentile rank**

When the pupils' ages were factored in, the standardised scores and percentile ranks for accuracy show a decrease for two pupils and an increase for just one. The standardised scores and percentile ranks for comprehension scores showed an increase for 3 pupils and a decrease for one pupil.

Figure 13: Neale Analysis of Reading Ability pre and post Story Links intervention

Name	Age at pre test	Test interval	Reading age		Standardised score		National percentile rank		Reading age		Standardised score		National percentile rank	
			Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Aaron	9.05	19 wks	<6.01	<b>6.03</b>	<70	<70	1st	1st	<6.01	<b>6.07</b>	<70	<b>71</b>	1st	<b>3rd</b>
John	9.10	12 wks	<6.01	<6.01	<70	<70	1st	1st	<6.01	<b>6.01</b>	<70	<70	1st	1st
Mark	8.07	14 wks	8.01	<b>9.00</b>	96	<b>101</b>	40th	<b>52nd</b>	7.07	<b>9.07</b>	89	<b>104</b>	24th	<b>60th</b>
Pete	10.09	21 wks	7.01	7.01	76	<b>72</b>	6th	<b>3rd</b>	6.10	<b>7.08</b>	<70	<b>78</b>	1st	<b>7th</b>
Rosie	9.04	12 wks	<6.01	<b>= 6.01</b>	<70	<70	1st	1st	<6.01	<6.01	<70	<70	1st	1st
Ed	10.01	12 wks	6.03	<b>6.06</b>	<70	<70	1st	1st	6.10	6.10	72	<b>73</b>	3rd	<b>4th</b>
Lisa	8.06	12 wks	<6.01	<6.01	<70	<70	1st	1st	<6.01	<6.01	<70	<70	1st	1st
Beth	9.03	12 wks	<6.01	<6.01	<70	<70	1st	1st	<6.01	<6.01	<70	<70	1st	1 <sup>st</sup>
Fred	7.00	23 wks	<6.01	<6.01	<70	<70	1st	1st	<6.01	<6.01	<70	<70	1st	1st
Ian	10.08	11 wks	<6.01	<6.01	<70	<70	1st	1st	<6.01	<6.01	<70	<70	1st	1st
Ross	9.02	17 wks	7.02	7.02	85	<b>81</b>	16	<b>11</b>	7.00	<b>7.01</b>	82	<b>78</b>	12	<b>7</b>
Harry	9.01	14 wks	<6.01	<6.01	<70	<70	1st	1st	<6.01	<b>=6.01</b>	<70	<70	1st	1st

**Note:** The NARA reading age scale starts at 6.01 for both accuracy and comprehension.

Red = increase | Blue = decrease

### Development of early-reading skills

As two thirds of the pupils failed to register on the NARA pre the intervention, the majority of the group were at a very early stage of reading. For instance, nine-year old Beth, according to her TA, *'couldn't read practically any words –even her name'* before the intervention. Because of this the TA explained how they had adapted the structure for Beth in the TA sessions and instead of reading the stories she had worked on a list of high frequency words. It seems that this had worked well with the TA reporting that her *'improvement has been absolutely amazing... she can read all these words [on the list]'*.

Ian's classteacher spoke about how he had started to focus on trying to sound out words:

*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.*

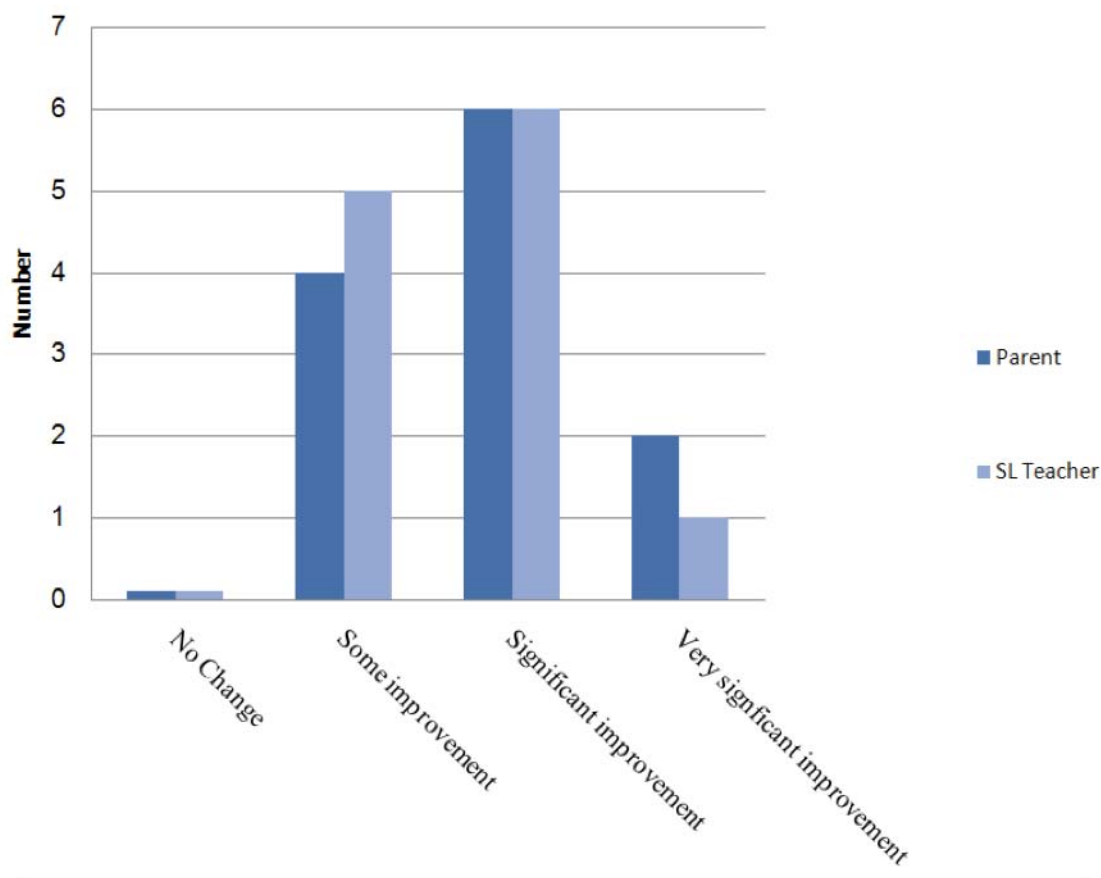
*Ian's classteacher*

And Harry's classteacher said that, although he was still not an independent reader, he had recently *'started to pick up books and pretend read'*.

#### 4.5.6 Impact on pupils' attitude to reading

The results of the Likert rating scale on the impact of the intervention on pupils' reading skills, completed by teachers and parents, are shown in Figure 14. Despite the small progress indicated on the NARA for the group as a whole, both teachers and parents thought that all of the pupils had made some progress with their reading with their comments focusing mainly on the change in pupils' attitude to reading.

Figure 14: Parents’ and Story Links Teachers’ Views on Impact on Pupils’ Reading



There was some discrepancy between parents and teachers views, with those of the professionals, perhaps unsurprisingly, corresponding most closely to the NARA results. For example, Lisa’s mother thought her daughter had made ‘*very significant improvement*’ while the Story Links teacher selected only ‘some improvement’.

All the TAs reported that pupils had been happy to come out and work with them on their reading task between sessions. Here is what Rosie’s TA had to say about how Rosie’s reading had progressed:

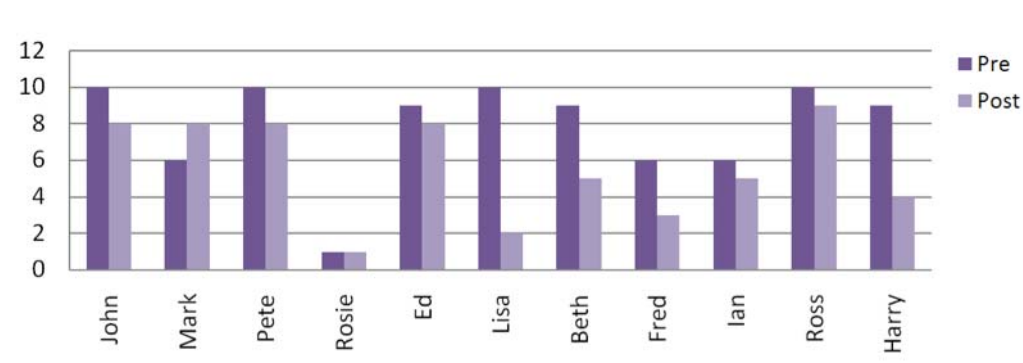
*Her reading has improved so much it actually shocked me. When she came to read to me... I was very prepared to jump in but she was fine... if you have a look at this story she’s got three pages...she might get stuck on a few odd words where maybe she lost the line...but absolutely brilliant.*

### 4.5.7 Impact on pupils’ engagement with learning in school

#### Impact on hyperactivity and attentional difficulties in the classroom

There appeared to be a reduction in hyperactivity and attention difficulties in the classroom for the majority of the pupils according to the Goodman’s SDQ as shown in Figure 15. Of the seven pupils in the ‘very high’ category for hyperactivity and inattention in the classroom pre intervention, only one remained in this category post intervention.

**Figure 15: Goodman's SDQ for impact on hyperactivity and attentional difficulties**



**Key:** 0-5 = Close to average; 6= Slightly raised; 7-8= High; 9-10= Very High;

Two of the pupils, Fred and Lisa, showed a very dramatic improvement in their attention in the classroom, and their cases are discussed in more detail in sections 4.1.3 and 4.2.1 respectively.

#### Pupil engagement with educational tasks in Story Links sessions

As mentioned in para 4.3.3, all the Story Links teachers reported that pupils had behaved very well in the Story Links sessions. This section will focus on how pupils engaged with the educational tasks that included reading, sharing feelings and co-creating stories, in the sessions.

Some engaged well with from the outset whereas others, as might be expected given the target group, had taken one or two sessions to settle into the activity:

*The first three sessions he didn't... find it easy to give an idea... [but] actually as the weeks went on he enjoyed it more and more.*

*Aaron's Mum*

A few of the pupils needed to be reminded to listen and not to interrupt when it was their parent’s turn to speak. This is what Lisa’s SL teacher had to say about this:



*First of all whenever it was her turn she (Lisa) would sit there saying 'I don't know what to say, I don't know what to say,' and minutes would go by then as soon as it was her Mum's turn she would interrupt her and tell her what to say or ask her for things, you know 'Can I have £1 to buy this? I need this, I need that.' Sometimes her mum... would stop and it would go on to 'You had £1 yesterday, and I'm not made of money.'...So I kind of stopped, I said right at the beginning, think that you, let your mum have her turn and we'll save this for the end of the session.' And she still did it for two more times-but that has stopped.*

*Lisa's SL teacher*

Others, like Fred and Beth, struggled at first to come up with an idea for their contribution to the story but did manage to engage:

*He would take time to think about things but (then) he would be OK.*

*Fred's mum*

*I think Beth found the actual exercise quite difficult because she had to use her imagination and she had to verbalise a situation which was actually quite a challenge for her really but she did wait her turn...she didn't interrupt...and her behaviour in the sessions was very good... there was plenty of laughing and joking and so on but when we got down to the business of the story it was work time so she did that.*

*Beth's SL teacher*

However, over the course of the Story Links programme all the pupils appeared to have engaged well with the story-making and even thought about it in between the sessions. For example Rosie's Dad spoke about how *'She'll come in and go "You know what? I've got to read you a story, I've got one for Tuesday, what about if Lily does this or Lily does that,"'* and Fred's Mum mentioned how *'he talked about going to them in the mornings on the way to school'* and how *'he has pride in doing the stories'*.

### Memorising the stories

Quite a few of the pupils would remember the stories very accurately:

*He just remembers the words, in fact he remembers the stories... I changed the name for 'Lenny', and I put 'Len' the lion called 'Len' and he corrected me and said the next week and said, "It's Lenny".*

*Pete's TA*

However, Harry's mother thought that Harry was overly reliant on remembering rather than developing new reading skills:

*He loved them (the stories), he remembered them very quickly I have to say, he'd read them once and he'd remember. So I still don't feel he reads any better, if I was honest.*

*Harry's Mum*

#### 4.5.8 Pupils' improved confidence in learning

As mentioned in para 2.3.4, low self-esteem was identified by teachers and parents as a key factor in pupils' poor engagement with learning. Evidence from the interviews with parents and teachers indicates that pupils' confidence increased as a result of the programme.

Almost all the parents mentioned their child's improved confidence in relation to reading:

*'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*

*As the weeks went on he just got better and better... you could see the confidence coming out of him.'*

*Pete's Mum*

*A lot more confident, happy to try things, he **wants** to read now which I think is a difference and he's picking up books that he is actually enjoying'*

*Ian's Mum*

Mark's Mum spoke about how initially *'when he saw a lot of writing on a piece of paper in the beginning he would just completely switch off and he wouldn't even start on it, and over the sessions this has just completely changed.'* She thought his greater confidence in reading had led to his having *'the confidence now to start putting things on paper himself'*. She added that the stories themselves had allowed him to express a different and more confident aspect of himself:

*He came into an imaginary world that he, where he was very interested and confident and... he would be full of fun and enjoyment and courage and ability.*

*Mark's Mum*

#### Change in body language as an indicator of improved confidence

The majority of the Story Links teachers also referred to a progressive improvement in pupils' confidence and engagement with the educational tasks in the Story Links sessions over the course of the intervention. When asked how this was evident in sessions many mentioned a change in pupils' body language:

*The first time... he kind of really hunched down... the thing that he does when he's a bit frightened, and at the risk of expressing himself or having a go... But by the end he was happily engaged and relaxed... and that [being hunched up] really wasn't there anymore.*

*Aaron's SL teacher*

*To start with he was a little bit nervous and bewildered...he would read with his hand or even his fist in his mouth... originally would loll about and have his head on the table... but after the first couple of sessions much more enthused... he would sit up and read...*

*Pete's TA*

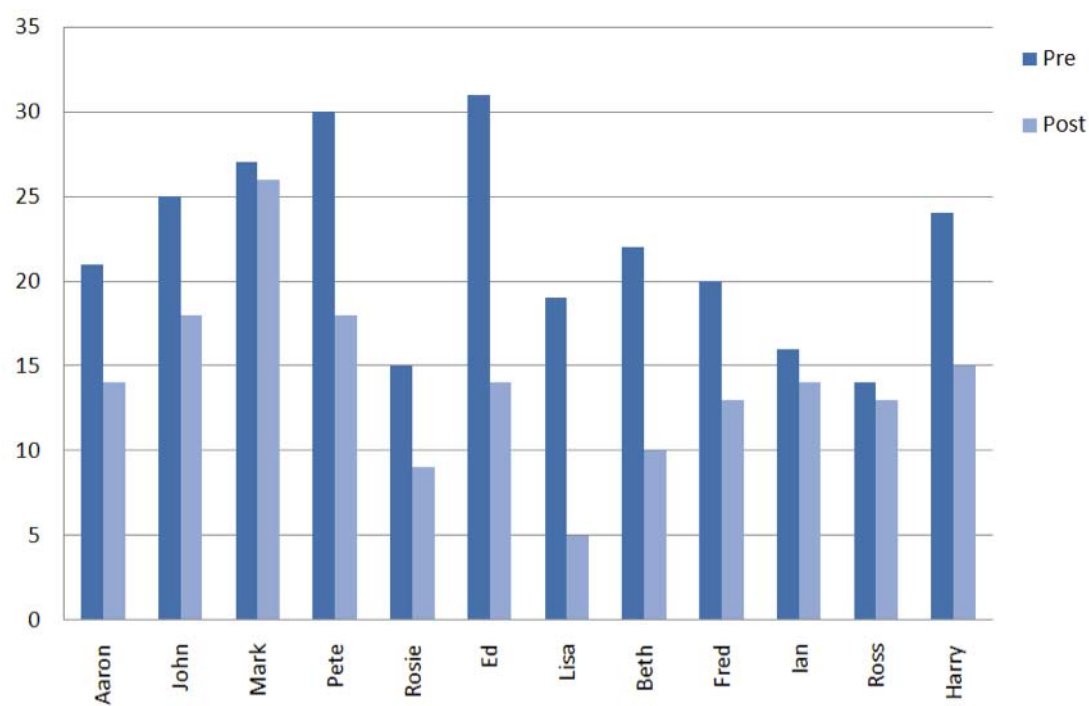
*At first his behaviour was a bit all over the place in the early sessions...., he didn't actually fall on the floor but he wriggled a lot and tipped the chair back and seemed I suppose bodily he seemed uncomfortable [for] probably three at least and then he became much, much, well I suppose the sitting, better... Certainly in the Story Links times I've seen him smile a lot and through the whole session... that was quite a change.*

Mark SL teacher

#### 4.6 Overall pupil stress related to behaviour, emotional and social difficulties

There was a significant reduction in overall stress related to BESDs for all of the pupils over the course of the Story Links programme as shown by the SDQ results in Figure 16.

Figure 16: 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 Goodman’s SDQ calculates Overall Stress as the sum of the scores for Emotional Anxiety (Figure 3) + Behavioural Difficulties (Figure 7) + Hyperactivity & Attentional Difficulties (Figure 16) + Difficulties Getting Along with Other Children (Figure 6).

The results in Figure 16 indicate that all of the pupils in the evaluation were experiencing above average Overall Stress before the intervention, with 9/12 pupils showing ‘very high’ overall stress. Improvement in this area was marked: all of the pupils showed a reduction in overall stress, with 8 of these pupils no longer in the ‘very high’ category for Overall Stress post intervention.

### Specific pupil observations

The two pupils, Beth and Ed whose scores indicated **most improvement** for overall stress were both at the same school although they had different Story Links teachers. (See section 4.3.2 for a more detailed discussion of Ed’s case.)

Both pupils had a lot of competition from siblings for their mother’s attention: Ed had a disabled brother; and Beth had 6 siblings within quite a ‘chaotic’ household. For both of them, the weekly sessions with their mother appeared to have provided a secure emotional base from which they could better engage in life at school.

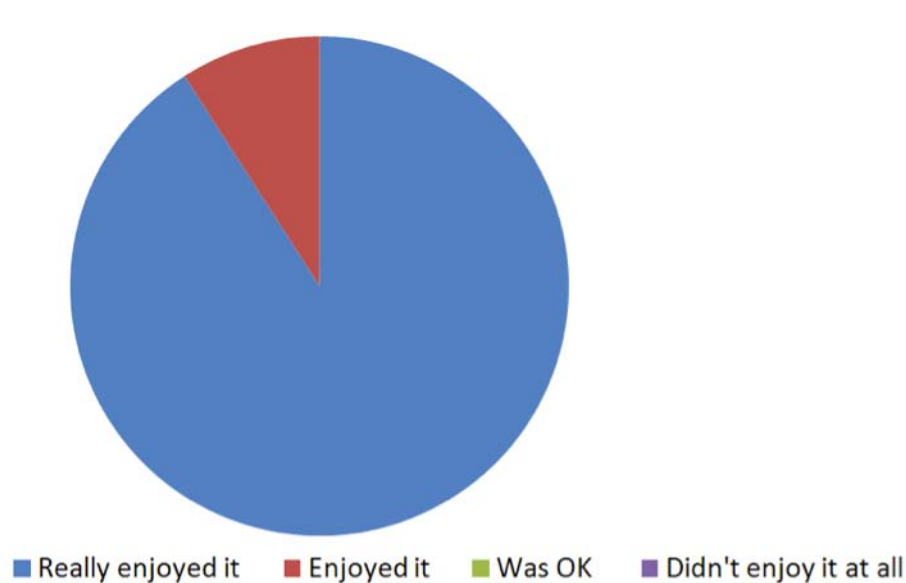
The pupil, Mark, who showed **least improvement** for Overall Stress, registering ‘very high’ for overall stress both in the pre and post SDQ is discussed in section 4.1.1.

## 4.7 Summary of overall views on the Story Links programme

### 4.7.1 Pupils’ overall response to the Story Links programme

All the pupils said they had enjoyed the sessions) with the majority saying they ‘really enjoyed it’ as shown in Figure 17. Reasons given by pupils for their enjoyment were primarily because they liked making up the stories and seeing their parents in school (see also section 4.2.1).

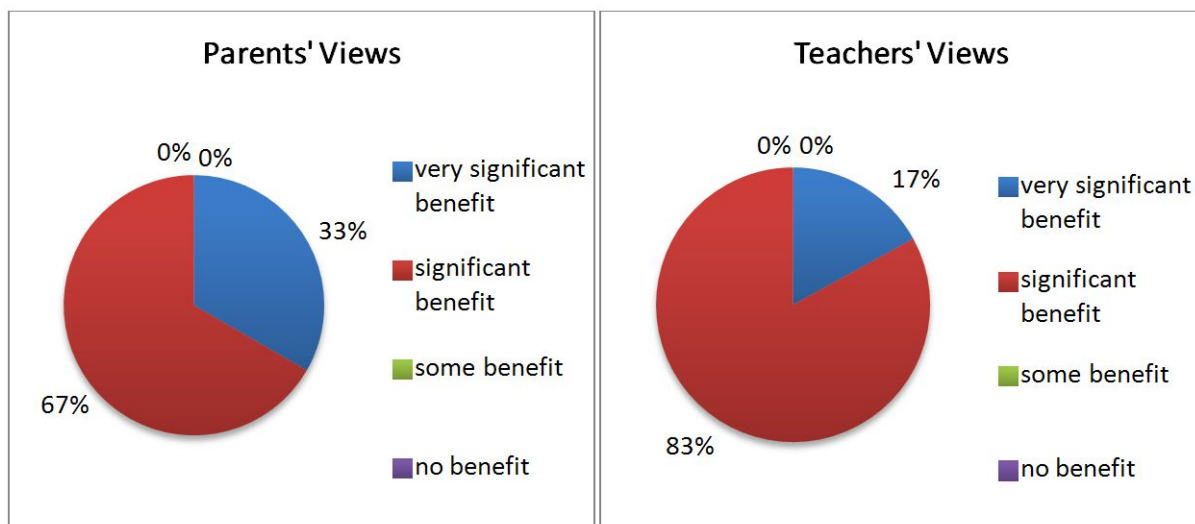
**Figure 17: Pupils' Enjoyment of Story Links Sessions**



### 4.7.2 Summary of parent and Story Links teachers views on the overall benefit of the Story Links programme

Parents and Story Links teachers were asked to complete a Likert scale rating the ‘overall benefit’ of the Story Links programme. As Figure 18 shows all parents and teachers thought that the Story Links programme was of ‘significant’ or ‘very significant’ overall benefit to the pupils, with parents rating it more highly than the teachers.

Figure 18: Parents’ and Story Links Teachers’ Views on the Overall Benefit of Story Links



The reasons given by teachers for the programme’s overall benefit focused on improved pupil confidence (see 4.5.8), improved behaviour (see 4.3.2), an improvement in the home/school relationship (see 4.4.8) and an opportunity to develop the pupil/TA relationship (see 4.2.3).

There had been a few concerns from the Story Links teachers. One initial concern was whether parents would attend but this did not prove to be the case in practice (see 4.4.1); one teacher had found working with the couple difficult (see 4.4.6); and a few had some minor concerns around the process of running the groups related to ensuring the story reached home in time, the TA’s timetabling and the appropriateness of some of the TA’s contributions (see 4.1.5).

The reasons given by parents as to why they thought the Story Links programme had been beneficial reiterated those of the teachers were that their child’s attitude to reading had improved (see 4.5.1) and their self- confidence had increased (see 4.5.8), while several also said that it had improved their child’s behaviour (see 4.3.2 ). To complete this chapter here are a few of the parents’ comments on the overall benefit of the Story Links programme:

*I was pretty sure this would help his reading, which is why I was doing it. What I wasn't prepared for was the impact it's had on the rest of his life.... His teacher was absolutely amazed at the improvement in his behaviour...at home his behaviour has improved tenfold*

*Ed's Mum*

*She is a lot more confident (with reading)...I think it's gone fabulous. I'm dyslexic myself so I have trouble with reading and writing and it was my biggest fear that my daughter would have it also.*

*Rosie's Dad*

*Brilliant, it's been really good. It's really been worthwhile and he's really enjoyed it. And I've seen such a change in him as well.*

*Pete's Mum*

## *Chapter 5. Discussion and Summary of Findings and Future Developments*

### *Discussion of Findings*

The findings presented in chapters 3 & 4 provide an in-depth exploration of the experience of delivering the Story Links intervention to parents and pupils at risk of exclusion due to BESDs. As the overview of the target group shows (2.3) the majority of the pupils were representative of some of the most vulnerable pupils in our schools. Most presented a high degree of anxiety in school and many of their presenting behaviours matched those that are typical for pupils with attachment anxiety (Geddes, 2006).

The majority of the parents of these pupils fell into the 'hard to access' group of parents and the initial expectation in many of the schools was that they would not maintain attendance on the programme. However this did not prove to be the case (4.4.1) and many teachers expressed 'shock' and surprise' that the parents had turned up. Evidence from the interviews with parents indicated that finding the sessions 'fun' and noticing an improvement in their child's engagement with reading were major factors. The commitment of the Story Links teachers is also to be acknowledged here. In one school it appeared that the teachers' text and phone reminders showed parents that they, as well as their children, were being 'held in mind' (4.4.1). The regret expressed by many of the parents at the sessions finishing (4.4.8) indicates that they too had found the sessions 'emotionally containing'. What was remarkable was that in one or two cases, where the parent failed to do any of the reading tasks at home and where there were concerns about the child's general welfare, parents continued to turn up to sessions.

In most cases pupils had looked forward to their parents coming into the sessions and these had been overall 'mutually enjoyable' for both pupils and parents. As mentioned in section 1.3, this mutual enjoyment is a key factor in promoting attachment. The unpredictability and spontaneous creativity of the story making activity had been 'fun' and often caused laughter in the groups

Data gathered from initial interviews with pupils and parents indicated that the activity of reading at home certainly had hitherto not been a shared 'mutually enjoyable' experience for any of the pupil/parent sets. However, the use of the jointly created stories as the home reading text appeared to have turned this around with the majority of the parents reporting, at the end of the intervention, an increase in the pupils' interest in reading at home and their own parental efforts to make time to hear their child read.

While some of the parents had poor or no literacy skills themselves, this did not deter parents from taking part and all of the parents were keen to support their child's literacy skills. This focus on literacy and addressing their child's emotional and behavioural difficulties obliquely through the story metaphor were significant factors in maintaining the attendance of parents- many of whom had previously had a 'tricky' relationship with the school. Another benefit of the programme was to provide parents with a chance to develop their skills and confidence as parents both in terms of putting down boundaries and supporting their child's learning (4.4.5).

As mentioned in section 1.3, Hughes (2004) has identified co-construction of meaning and the co-regulation of affect as central features in the cultivation of attachment security. The analysis of the stories throughout chapters 3 and 4 shows that the co-creation of stories did in fact facilitate a 'co-construction of meaning' by parent, pupil and teacher with emerging themes relating to the child's presenting issues. Many of the final stories presented a search to understand difficult issues such as conflict with peers or being overwhelmed by powerful emotions.

In relation to co-regulation of affect, it was noticeable that, while created by sequential contributions from pupil and adults in the group, all the stories had an internal coherence. This indicates both that parents, TA and the teacher were able to 'attune' to the child's imaginary world and that the child was also able to respond appropriately, albeit unconsciously perhaps, to the particular metaphor presented by the adults.

However, at times, some parents needed support to attune to their child's story contribution rather than to react to it (4.4.3). In all cases the Story Links teacher had been able to help the parent to accept and reflect on their child's contribution rather than trying to change it. Mostly this attunement in the co-creation of the stories was to the child's internal emotional world although in one or two cases the parent tended to focus on external events (4.4.3).

A further attunement developed in relation to the parent listening to their child read. Many parents were aware of how emotionally fraught this activity could be and during the intervention some of them had managed to respond more sensitively to their child's pace, their need to have a 'go' themselves and the time at which the reading took place. However, several still felt the need for support in the best way to support their child's reading skills.

The evidence indicates that pupils felt emotionally comfortable in sessions and, while difficult emotional issues were often addressed in the metaphor, they had generally not felt emotionally overwhelmed by the stories. Only in one case was this evident (4.4.7) and here the pupil was able to self-regulate the emotional overwhelm surrounding his absent father by saying he didn't want to do another story about the father dragon who had just taken off in the story (literally) leaving the young dragon in charge.

All pupils had behaved well overall in the Story Links sessions. However, a few pupils sometimes tried to control their parent (4.5.7) by interrupting them when it was their turn to speak and in one case the pupil had tried to dictate to her mother that she should not come the following week. However, in all cases the parent was supported by the teacher to maintain the adult position and the pupil responded by no longer presenting as a 'parentified' child and allowed the parent and other adults to be in charge. And in one case the story had mirrored the mother's successful attempt to get her son to sleep in his own bed rather than in hers.

The majority of the pupils showed a significant improvement in their behaviour. However, as one parent pointed out this could also be a 'slow process', particularly given the nature of the pupil target group, and the behaviour of some of the pupils could slip back at times.

While pupils' attitude and confidence in reading appeared to have improved there was in fact little progress with regards to their standardised reading scores. The short interval between testing and the fact that two-thirds of the cohort were below the baseline of the NARA may have been factors here. There was evidence that many of the pupils had memorised the stories. While this showed that the stories had resonated with pupils, there is the issue of whether some had used this familiarity to avoid developing new strategies for reading. This might be addressed by including some sentence level 'games' for the pupil to do at home in future programmes e.g. cut a sentence from the story into words and the pupil has to order the words correctly.

One aspect of the programme that did not appear to have really worked in many cases was the engagement of the classteacher in supporting the behavioural reward system. This might be addressed by including the classteacher in a discussion with the parent and pupil at the start of the programme.

There was clearly an imbalance in gender both relating to the pupils and the attending parents. While the majority of pupils referred were boys this is representative of the wider gender imbalance relating to exclusions (DCSF, 2009). All except one of the attending parents were the mother and the only father to attend only did so with his wife. There were some reservations from the teacher about working with the couple but it may be that work with another couple might be very different. It would also be interesting to explore ways to engage fathers to attend, particularly as many of the stories addressed issues relating to them.



## Summary of Findings

The aim of this evaluation was to assess the impact of the Story Links Programme on pupils' emotional and social well-being; pupils' behaviour and rates of exclusion; the engagement of parents with their child's learning; and pupils' reading skills and engagement with learning.

The evaluation included a pre and post intervention standardised behavioural screening questionnaire completed by classteachers, a pre and post intervention standardised reading assessment, the analysis of over eighty co-created stories and the analysis of over eighty interviews with parents, teachers, TAs and pupils who participated in the Story Links intervention.

The findings indicate that the intervention had a number of positive effects in supporting pupils' emotional and social well-being, engaging them in learning and improving their behaviour. It also engaged parents in their child's learning, quite significantly given the vulnerable nature of the pupil cohort and the low literacy levels of some of the parents. However, while pupils' attitude to reading significantly improved there was little progress in reading skills as measured on the Neale Analysis of Reading Assessment (NARA). The findings will now be summarised in relation to the main areas of investigation.

### 5.1 *Impact on pupils' emotional and social well-being*

#### 5.1.1 **Significant improvement in pupils' emotional and social difficulties**

The reasons given by teachers for the referral of pupils to the Story Links programme (para 2.3.5) indicated that the cohort was representative of some of the most emotionally vulnerable pupils in our schools. The Goodman's SDQ results and the interviews with parents and teachers, presented in sections 4.1 and 4.6 provide clear evidence that there was a reduction in the overall emotional stress for all the pupils' over the course of the intervention and that for the majority of the pupils this reduction was significant.

There was also a significant improvement in peer relationships as indicated by the Goodman's SDQ (para 4.2.2), completed by the classteacher, and observations from the parents and school-based professionals who noted that several of the pupils were more able to manage conflict situations the classroom and playground after the intervention.

It is not claimed that reduced levels of emotional distress were due solely to the Story Links intervention as there were other factors, both at home and school, that may have had an impact. However, the evidence from the interviews did indicate that the Story Links programme had been a significant factor.

#### 5.1.2 **Co-created stories addressed pertinent emotional and social difficulties**

The analysis of the co-created stories, presented in the two individual pupil profiles in chapter 3 and throughout the cross-case findings in chapter 4, indicates that many of the themes explored in the story metaphor mirrored pupils' presenting emotional, social and behavioural issues.

The co-created stories had a powerful effect in several ways. Firstly, they often served as a reminder of the nurturing role of the parent. Secondly, many of the pupils' stories addressed issues relating to both friendship difficulties and sibling rivalry. Thirdly, they enabled the children to address their anxiety through the metaphor in the story with prominent themes that emerged being lack of friends, fear, abandonment and lack of nurture.

A content analysis of the stories indicated Story Links teachers were able to provide story openings that mirrored pupils' presenting emotional issues and that pupils instinctively projected their own concerns onto the story characters.

According to comments from parents and pupils (para 4.2.1) the sessions had succeeded in providing a 'mutually enjoyable activity', a factor in promoting positive attachment (Bowlby, 1988). What appeared to be particularly important to the pupils was the undivided attention of the parent without distractions from siblings or household chores. The work with the Teaching Assistant both in the main and follow-up sessions during the week also provided opportunities for the pupils to experience a positive attachment relationship with a school-based figure. 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, 2008).

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. The Story Links teachers reported that most parents were able to do this, though initially some parents were more able to do this than others (para 4.4.3). A quarter of the parents had also begun making up stories with their child at home and in two cases, siblings had been included in this activity.

The role of the absent father was a significant and surprising finding. Many of the stories indicated a preoccupation with an absent father (para 4.4.7). In some stories pupils highlighted a yearning for more contact with their fathers and in others a sense of abandonment. In two cases, the Story Links programme appeared to have led to the fathers, both of whom were separated from the child's mother, coming into their son's school for the first time.

## **5.2** *Impact on pupils' behaviour and rates of exclusion*

### **5.2.1** **Significant improvement in behaviour and a reduction in exclusion**

By the end of the programme there had been a significant reduction in the SDQ score for behavioural difficulties in the classroom for the majority of pupils (para 4.3.1). This improvement was also noted by parents and Story Links teachers. Some pupils had taken a few weeks to settle into the Story Links sessions but all teachers reported that pupils' behaviour had, overall, been remarkably good with only a few needing to be reminded to listen and not interrupt others. Some teachers and parents expressed surprise at how well pupils had behaved.

There was a significant decrease in pupils' exclusion rates from school, the classroom and the playground during the Story Links programme (para 4.3.7). Six of the twelve pupils 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. This was in contrast to the twelve months prior to the intervention, when

eleven of the twelve pupils had regularly been removed from the classroom or playground because of their behaviour.

### **5.3** *Impact on the engagement of parents with their child's learning*

#### **5.3.1** **A positive engagement of parents with their child's learning**

Given that many of the parents had not had regular or positive contact with the school before the Story Links programme, the level of attendance was remarkably good with only two out of the fourteen sets of parents who started the programme not completing it (para 2.3.6). The twelve parent sets who did complete and whose data is included in the evaluation attended at least seven out of ten of the sessions, with five parents attending all. Teachers' initial apprehensiveness about parents not turning up did not prove to be the case.

Parental attendance was supported in some schools by the commitment teachers providing a pre-intervention meeting for parents, the SENCO's support in choosing parents, and regular phone and text message reminders from teachers to parents about the times of sessions (para 4.4.1).

#### **5.3.2** **A 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 (para 4.4.8). For the parents, it was the positive focus on the pupils' learning rather than their poor behaviour that seemed to have made a difference. 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.

### **5.4** *Impact on pupils' reading skills and engagement with learning*

#### **5.4.1** **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 SDQ and observations of classteachers (para 4.5.7). In the Story Links sessions, all pupils engaged well with the story-making aspect and many talked about the stories between sessions (para 4.5.7). Quite a few would remember the stories very accurately indicating that they had paid good attention to what had been said.

#### **5.4.2** **Minimal increase in reading ability as measured on the NARA**

There was minimal progress in the pupils' reading ability as measured by the NARA (para 4.5.5). Eight out of the twelve pupils were below the 6.01 starting reading age for both accuracy and comprehension before the Story Links programme. While four showed an increase in reading age for accuracy and six for comprehension, when the pupils' ages were factored in the progress was negligible: 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.

Given the very poor initial reading skills of the cohort and the relatively brief average time interval between pre and post assessment, it might have been useful to use another early-stage reading assessment to measure small-step progress alongside the NARA.

### 5.4.3 Improved engagement and confidence in reading

While the NARA scores indicated that pupils had made only limited progress with their reading skills, both teachers and parents commented that all pupils showed an increased interest in the activity of reading (para 4.5.6). 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.

The programme also seemed to have an impact on pupils' low academic 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 a reader was a prominent theme. This developing self-confidence was also evident in the Story Links sessions, not only in how pupils contributed during the sessions, but also in their changed body language (para 4.5.8).

The inclusion of a follow-up reading programme, to be initiated once the 10-week intervention Story Links programme has been completed, might ensure that the progress made in pupils' attitude and parental engagement in reading, is capitalised on to further develop pupils' reading skills.

## 5.5 Future developments

### 5.5.1 Implications for further research

In the light of the above findings and discussion there are a number of issues that might be explored in future research into the impact of the Story Links intervention. These are as follows:

- Investigate ways to engage more fathers in the Story Links Programme.
- Revisit the target group to assess the long-term (minimum one year) impact on reading skills and parental engagement with learning.
- Investigate the inclusion of sentence level 'games', drawn from the story, for the pupil and parent to do at home in order to extend word recognition skills
- Investigate ways to continue the involvement of parents with pupils' learning after post Story Links.

### 5.5.2 Key recommendations

Following the positive impact the intervention had on pupils' emotional and social well-being, pupils' behaviour, pupils' attitude to reading and the engagement of parents in their child's learning, it is recommended that:

- The Story Links training is made available to a wider group of educational professionals.
- A training-for-trainers programme is developed so that training delivery is not solely reliant on the current trainer.

- Provide training or written guidelines for TAs supporting Story Links.
- Investigate ways to Increase classteachers' involvement in the intervention.
- Use an early reading assessment tool alongside the NARA in future evaluations in order to identify small step progress in reading skills.

### Contact for future developments

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### Web resources

Teachers TV video *Working with Families* featuring a Story Links session and downloadable supporting resources:

[www.teachers.tv/video/34482](http://www.teachers.tv/video/34482)

Book of sample stories created by pupil and parent in Teachers TV *Working with Families* video:

[www.therapeuticstorywriting.com/downloads/dino/dino-the-dragon-web.pdf](http://www.therapeuticstorywriting.com/downloads/dino/dino-the-dragon-web.pdf)

Centre for Therapeutic Storywriting for Story Links resources, training and project details:

<http://www.therapeuticstorywriting.com/StoryLinks/Training.php>



## *Appendices*

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### *Appendix 1: Teachers' TV video clip of modelled Story Links session with parent and pupil*

The measuring tools were trialled in two schools prior to their use with the evaluation target group. Teachers TV made a video of one of the sessions delivered by the principal researcher and this can be viewed online at: [www.teachers.tv/video/34482](http://www.teachers.tv/video/34482)

*Appendix 2: Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire*

**Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire**

T4-16

For each item, please mark the box for Not True, Somewhat True or Certainly True. It would help us if you answered all items as best you can even if you are not absolutely certain or the item seems daft! Please give your answers on the basis of the child's behaviour over the last six months or this school year.

Child's Name .....

Male/Female

Date of Birth.....

	Not True	Somewhat True	Certainly True
Considerate of other people's feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often complains of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shares readily with other children (treats, toys, pencils etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often has temper tantrums or hot tempers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rather solitary, tends to play alone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Generally obedient, usually does what adults request	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Many worries, often seems worried	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Constantly fidgeting or squirming	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has at least one good friend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often fights with other children or bullies them	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Generally liked by other children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Easily distracted, concentration wanders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nervous or clingy in new situations, easily loses confidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Kind to younger children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often lies or cheats	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Picked on or bullied by other children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Often volunteers to help others (parents, teachers, other children)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thinks things out before acting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Steals from home, school or elsewhere	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gets on better with adults than with other children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Many fears, easily scared	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sees tasks through to the end, good attention span	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Do you have any other comments or concerns?

**Please turn over - there are a few more questions on the other side**

Overall, do you think that this child has difficulties in one or more of the following areas: emotions, concentration, behaviour or being able to get on with other people?

No	Yes-minor difficulties	Yes-definite difficulties	Yes-severe difficulties
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you have answered "Yes", please answer the following questions about these difficulties:

● How long have these difficulties been present?

Less than a month	1-5 months	6-12 months	Over a year
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

● Do the difficulties upset or distress the child?

Not at all	Only a little	Quite a lot	A great deal
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

● Do the difficulties interfere with the child's everyday life in the following areas?

	Not at all	Only a little	Quite a lot	A great deal
PEER RELATIONSHIPS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CLASSROOM LEARNING	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

● Do the difficulties put a burden on you or the class as a whole?

Not at all	Only a little	Quite a lot	A great deal
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Signature .....

Date .....

Class Teacher/Form Tutor/Head of Year/Other (please specify:)

**Thank you very much for your help**

© Robert Goodwin, 2005

## ***Appendix 3: Letter to Schools Participating in the Evaluation of the Story Links Intervention***

Spring 2009

Dear Participating School,

Thank you for considering taking part in the evaluation of the Story Links intervention in your school following the attendance of a member of your staff at the 3-day training course. Story Links is a University of Chichester project, delivered in collaboration with the Centre for Therapeutic Storywriting, and supported by the TDA and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

The project aims to use parent partnership to support pupils at risk of exclusion because of behaviour, emotional and social difficulties and who also are behind with their reading (see pages 4 & 5 for a summary of the overall project).

We are looking for a number of schools, who have participated in the training and who will be implementing the intervention, to take part in the evaluation aspect of the programme.

### **School Resources Required to Implement the Story Links Programme**

The evaluation will take place in schools that can ensure the programme is run for a 10 week period (either side of a holiday break is fine). An hour needs to be allocated for sessions with each parent+ pupil. Parent, pupil + a TA attend the session for the first 30 min. The teacher running the group then requires a further 30 min to write up the co-created story at the pupil's reading level directly after the session. A copy of the story is then given to the TA who delivers 2 X 20 min session with the pupil during the week and another copy goes home to the parent for the home-learning part of the programme.

### **Evaluation**

The evaluation will involve a researcher visiting your school before the intervention and at the end of the 10 week intervention. They will interview the parent, the pupil, the classteacher and the facilitating teacher. Each of these interviews will take a maximum of 20 min. The researcher will also conduct a pre and post assessment of the pupils' reading ability using the Neale analysis of reading.

### **Focus of the evaluation**

The evaluation process will assess the impact of the Story Links intervention on the emotional and social well-being of the pupil; engagement of the parent with their child's learning; rates of exclusion; incidents of challenging behaviour that could lead to exclusion; reading skills; and pupil engagement with learning in the classroom.

### **Ethics and Confidentiality**

The researcher will adhere to the British Educational Research Association code of ethics. Neither the school nor persons interviewed will be named. Parents will be informed of these conditions before being interviewed and if they choose not to take part in the research, this decision will be respected.

I would like to thank you again for considering being part of the research evaluation. If there is anything else you would like to discuss, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Trisha

### **Trisha Waters**

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## *Appendix 4: Questions for Parent and Pupil Interviews*

### **Parent/carer pre intervention**

1. How do you feel X is getting on at school?
2. How do you think he/she is getting on with his reading?
3. What do you think would help him/her do better at school?
4. How is X at home?
5. Does he have any siblings? /How does he get on with them?
6. What's it like being X's mum/dad/carer?
7. What is his relationship like with his other parent?
8. What's your relationship like with the school?
9. Do you have time to tell or read stories with him/her at home? Would like to do this more? What would help to find the time?
10. (If yes) How often do you do this?
11. (If yes) When do you do this?
12. Is it an enjoyable experience for both of you when you read together?
13. What sort of stories/books does he enjoy?
14. Do you enjoy reading this sort of book with him?
15. How do you feel about being part of these sessions?
16. Is there anything else you would like to add (about other adults present, timing of sessions, childcare needs etc)?

### **Parent/carer post intervention**

1. How have you felt about coming along to these sessions?
2. Has the pattern of reading with your child changed during the programme?
3. How often did you read with X?
4. Where and when did you read?
5. What was it like making up the stories in the sessions?
6. What did you think about the stories?
7. What were the main themes?
8. How did you feel X related to the stories? Do you think they've helped X? In what way?
9. Can you choose a story that was particularly significant? Tell me what was significant about this story.
10. Do you think the sessions have made a difference to how your child is at school?
11. In what way?
12. How would you describe your relationship with the school and staff? Has it changed?
13. Would you recommend the Story Links course to other parents?
14. How would you describe it to them?
15. Any other comments?

**Pupil pre-intervention**

1. How much do you enjoy reading?

Not very much	It's OK	I enjoy it	I really enjoy it
---------------	---------	------------	-------------------

Why?

2. How good do you think you are at reading?

Not very good	OK	Good	Very good
---------------	----	------	-----------

Why?

3. Would you like to get better at reading? Why?
4. Do you read most at home or at school?
5. Do you read with anyone at home? Who? How often? What's it like when you read to your Mum/Dad/Carer?
6. What sort of books do you like?
7. What are you reading at the moment?
8. What's your favourite thing to do with your Mum/Dad/carer?
9. How do feel about reading in class?
10. Do you enjoy being at school? Why?
11. What's your behaviour like in school?
12. Do you have friends in your class?
13. What do you like most about school?
14. What do you like least about school?
15. What are your hobbies or favourite things to do out of school?

**Pupil post-intervention**

1. How have you found coming along to the Story Links session?

Not liked it at all	It's been OK	Enjoyed it	I really enjoy it
---------------------	--------------	------------	-------------------

2. Do you think it's made a difference to your reading? In what way?

3. How much do you enjoy reading now?

Not liked it at all	It's been OK	Enjoyed it	I really enjoy it
---------------------	--------------	------------	-------------------

4. How good do you think you are at reading now?

Not very good	OK	Quite good	Very good
---------------	----	------------	-----------

5. Have you been reading more at home? What's this been like?

6. What were most of the stories about?
7. What's it been like having your Mum/Dad/carer coming into school for the Story Links sessions?
8. Which story did you like most?
9. Is there anything else you would like to say about the sessions?



**Appendix 5: Post-intervention Likert rating questions for Story Links teachers and parents**

1. What impact do you think has the Story Links programme had on:

a. Pupil's reading

No change	Some improvement	Significant improvement	Very significant improvement
-----------	------------------	-------------------------	------------------------------

Comment:

b. Pupil's awareness of his/her feelings and the feelings of others

No change	Some improvement	Significant improvement	Very significant improvement
-----------	------------------	-------------------------	------------------------------

Comment:

c. Pupil's behaviour

No change	Some improvement	Significant improvement	Very significant improvement
-----------	------------------	-------------------------	------------------------------

Comment:

d. Home/school relationship

No change	Some improvement	Significant improvement	Very significant improvement
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Comment:

e. How would you describe the overall benefit of the Story Links programme in supporting the pupil:

No benefit	Some benefit	Significant benefit	Very significant benefit
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Comment:

**Appendix 6: Overview of the pupils presenting issues and their family context**  
(all names changed)

Pupil	Reason for referral (all pupils also identified as having poor reading skills)	SEN register	Family context	Parental and sibling literacy difficulties
1. Aaron 9yrs	Previously excluded for behaviour from mainstream school -now attends <b>special school</b> . Temper tantrums sometimes requiring restraint.	Statement ADHD, ASC & lit	Parents separated. Lives part of week with Mum and part with Dad. 1 younger sibling.	
2. John 9yrs	Aggressive behaviour in classroom. Sent home at lunchtime because of fights on playground. Mother's carer.	SA+ BESDs & lit	Parents separated. Lives with disabled Mother. Sees Dad in holidays.2 older siblings in care	Dad illiterate. Mum & older siblings have poor literacy
3. Mark 8yrs	Pulls hair out, hurts other children, refuses to work, v. tearful, calls out makes noises & sings in class, easily upset, hides in cupboard.	SA+ BESDs & lit	Parents separated. Lives with Mum, stays with dad regularly.1 younger sibling	
4. Pete 10yrs	Non-compliant, excluded from classroom & school trips because of his aggressive and non-compliant behaviour. Complaints from other parents about his behaviour	SA+ BESDs & lit	Parents together.	
5. Rosie 9yrs	Emotional rather than behavioural, Self-excludes when upset. Self-harms, scratching face, pulls out hair.	SA+ BESDs & lit	Parents together. Arguments with neighbours. Younger sibling. Dad disabled.	Dad illiterate, Mum poor literacy.
6. Ed 10yrs	Severe anger issues at home and school, little empathy.	SA+ BESDs and lit	Parents separated. Step-dad & sees own dad fortnightly. Disabled brother at same school.	Older sister has poor literacy
7. Lisa 8 yrs	Immature, distracted, poor literacy, friendship difficulties, non-compliant.	SA+ BESDs & lit.	Parents separated. Sees Dad.	
8. Beth 9yrs	Runs out of school, excluded last year for aggressive behaviour, shouting and swearing at adults	SA+ BESDs & lit.	Parents together. 6 siblings.	Both parents illiterate. All siblings have poor literacy.
9. Fred 7 yr	Excluded from prev. school then out of school for 4 months. Self-harming: bangs head on table, punches himself. Has threatened to kill himself.	SA+ BESDs, Sp & lang. & lit.	Parents separated. Step father, biological f. not known. 3 older siblings.	Step-father cannot read English

10. Ian 10 yrs	Prev. excluded from mainstream school because of aggressive behaviour – now at <b>special school</b> . Temper tantrums.	Statement ADHD, ASC & lit.	Parents together- child has conflict with dad who has Asperger's	
11. Ross 9yr	Inattention a 'major' issue. Looked After Child. Concerns about progress with learning. One or two behavioural incidents in school but mainly 'good'	SA BESDs (ADD), & Lit.	In and out of care of care from birth to 5 yr prior to long term foster care placement.	
12. Harry 9 yrs	Hiding under tables and loud wailing in classroom, regularly excluded from classroom, easily upset by random things e.g. the sun shining	SA+ BESDs & lit	Parents separated. Lives with Mum and sees Dad regularly. Niece in his class has been taken into foster care.	Dad, granddad & brother illiterate
(SA= School Action; SA+= School Action Plus; Sp & lang= Speech and language difficulties; lit=literacy difficulties)				

## Contact for future developments

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