

Story Links

Working with Parents of Pupils at Risk of Exclusion



Programme Evaluation

TDA Final Summary Report

Summer 2009

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1 *Project overview*

Project aims

The aim of the research was to evaluate the impact of the parent-partnership Story Links Programme. This intervention supports pupils at risk of exclusion who also have literacy difficulties and involves pupils, parents and teachers in the co-creation of stories that address the pupils' behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESDs).

The Story Links Project is co-funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. It has three strands:

- the first strand involved the delivery of a three-day Story Links **training** to five cohorts of professionals
 - the second strand is the **evaluation**, reported here
 - the third strand is the production of a **training manual** to support professionals using the intervention in schools.
- The overall project spans 20 months with the evaluation research strand conducted over an 18 month period.

What is Story Links?

The 10-week Story Links Programme (SLP), developed by the primary researcher, uses therapeutic storywriting to involve parents of pupils (6-11 years) at risk of exclusion in the education of their child. 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 solution-focused 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 learning by encouraging them to regularly hear their child read the typed-up co-created stories at home.

Background and context

The pupils targeted were all on the special educational needs (SEN) register for both behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESDs) and poor literacy. These are some of the most vulnerable children in our schools.

For many of these pupils, emotional difficulties get in the way of their learning and very often reading skills are below those of their peers (Cole et al, 1998). Research by Desforges & Abouchaar (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).

Key words: Parents; therapeutic storywriting; attachment; exclusion; challenging behaviour; behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESDs); inclusion; solution-focused; metaphor.

2 *Evaluation methodology*

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

- pupils' emotional and social well-being
- pupils' behaviour difficulties and rates of exclusion
- engagement of parents with their child's learning
- pupils' reading skills and engagement with learning.

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

The following specific methods were used:

Quantitative	Qualitative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) completed pre and post SLP by classteachers • Neale Analysis of Reading Assessment (NARA) pre and post SLP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre and post SLP: semi-structured interviews with individual pupils, parents/carers, the classteacher and SL teacher • Post SLP: semi-structured interviews with supporting teaching assistant(TA)+ SENCO when available • Content analysis of parent/pupil stories

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

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

Target pupil/parent group

Pupils were selected by Story Links (SL) teachers on two criteria: they were at risk of exclusion due to behavioural, emotional or social difficulties 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 and consisted of nine boys and three girls. These were drawn from seven schools and involved ten SL teachers. Another two parents were also selected and took part in the pre-evaluation but are not included in the final evaluation as one did not complete the intervention in the time frame due to illness and the other was unable to maintain regular attendance.

Four pupils had at least one biological parent who was illiterate. Of the parents who attended sessions, two of the parents were illiterate and a further two described themselves as dyslexic.

3 Key findings

Impact on pupils' emotional and social well-being

Please note: The names of pupils are changed for confidentiality reasons.

★ **A significant improvement in pupils' overall emotional stress**

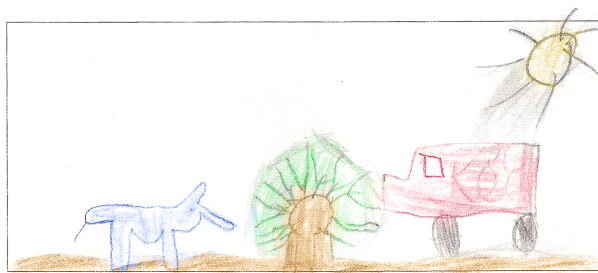
The pre-SLP interviews with parents and teachers revealed a high incidence of emotional anxiety in the target group of pupils. This finding was confirmed by the pre-SDQ for overall stress completed by the classteacher which showed three-quarters of the pupils as experiencing very high stress levels. Post-SLP, 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.

For example:

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



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

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 SL 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.

★ Impact on Significant Relationships

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).

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

Pete's mum

"Brilliant, I really enjoyed the sessions - they used to brighten me up on a Tuesday... We had laughs and giggled."

Beth's mum

What appeared to be particularly important to the pupils was the undivided attention of 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 SL 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.

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 SL teachers.

During the Story Links sessions, some pupils had taken a few weeks to settle in but all the SL 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.

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

Pete's mum

★ 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 SLP the number of removals from the classroom reduced dramatically and there was also a decrease in the number of removals from the playground.

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 SLP, 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.

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

John's mum

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

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

SL Teacher

✳ Increase in pupils reading to parent at home

Before the SLP 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.

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

Ian's mum

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

John's mum

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

✳ Parental engagement with story metaphor

A critical aspect of the intervention was that the parent would engage and reflect on the metaphor in the co-created stories to address their child's behavioural and emotional issues. Most of the SL 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. Here is an extract from a story by ten year-old boy Pete who, like Big George in the story, had no friends to play with and would frequently 'pick on' others:

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

Big George explained to all the others: "It is not my fault that I am so mean.

My Dad's name is Godzilla. My Dad will not play with me. Every time I ask him he won't play."



In two cases, the SLP 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.

Impact on pupils' reading skills and engagement with learning

★ Significant reduction in hyperactivity and attentional difficulties in the classroom

There was a significant reduction in hyperactivity and attentional difficulties in the classroom. This was indicated both by the SDQ and observations of classteachers.

"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."

Classteacher

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

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

★ Improved engagement and confidence in reading

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

"He became more interested in being able to read, he became much more enthusiastic about wanting to read it. And very pleased that he could, he felt he could read it."

SL teacher

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

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

Aaron's Mum

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

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

TA

4 *Key recommendations*

- **Roll out Story Links Training** to a wider group of educational professionals.
- Deliver a **training-for-trainers programme** so that training delivery is not solely reliant on the training developer.
- **Consider ways to continue involvement of parents** with pupils' reading after they've taken part in a Story Links intervention.
- Provide training or written **guidelines for supporting TAs**.
- In future evaluations, use **an additional early reading assessment** to identify small step progress alongside the NARA.

5 *Future developments*

Areas for further investigation

- Investigate ways to **engage more fathers** in the Story Links Programme.

Benefit Realisation: dissemination, outputs and continuation

★ **Dissemination**

- **Presentations on Story Links Project delivered** at conferences organised by NASEN, PATOSS, University of Chichester and Escalate.

★ **Outputs**

- **Full report** to be completed 30/11/09 and sent to TTRB.
- **Teachers TV video** of a Story Links session (see web resources).
- **Book of stories** written in session featured in Teachers TV programme published online and available as a Teachers TV resource (see web resources).
- **Online training manual** (funded by Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and to be completed 30/11/09) will be informed by the research findings.
- **55 professionals supporting vulnerable pupils trained** in the Story Links intervention (funded by Esmee Fairbairn Foundation).

★ **Continuation**

- Future training courses will be refined in the light of the evaluation findings.

Expanding Story Links Training

In order to develop capacity and sustainability, bids will be submitted to a range of funding bodies to support a further roll out of the 3-day Story Links Training; the development and delivery of a Training-for-trainers programme; and additional research into the engagement of fathers in the Story Links Programme.

6 Additional information and resources

Web resources

Teachers TV video *Working with Families* featuring a Story Links session and downloadable supporting resources:

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

Centre for Therapeutic Storywriting for Story Links resources, training and project details:

<http://www.therapeuticstorywriting.com/StoryLinks/Training.php>

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