

Supporting pupils with wordless books

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

The crucial role that school professionals play in supporting the Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) of young people in schools is highlighted in the 2017 Government Green Paper which notes: "Appropriately trained and supported staff such as teachers, school nurses, counsellors, and teaching assistants can achieve results comparable to those achieved by trained therapists in ... addressing mild to moderate mental health." (DHSC/DfE, 2017, p. 38). With CAMHS resources stretched to breaking

point, this has never been more necessary.

Mental health is "more than the absence or management of mental health problems" (NICE, 2008). Mental health gives us the resilience to enjoy life, to survive emotional pain, to cope and to feel safe. More than half of all mental health problems emerge before the age of 14 years, so it is crucial to identify and address areas of SEMH need for children and young people, especially those with learning and communication difficulties

(DfE/DH, 2015), who are on average four times more likely to have mental health problems than their mainstream peers (Emerson and Hatton, 2007).

Teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) are uniquely placed to support children and young people's SEMH. They spend more time with them than any other professional group. Their early identification, intervention and support of pupils' SEMH difficulties can enable pupils to remain engaged in education, which

To see a summary of the green paper and to access the full document, go to <https://bit.ly/2To03Hs>

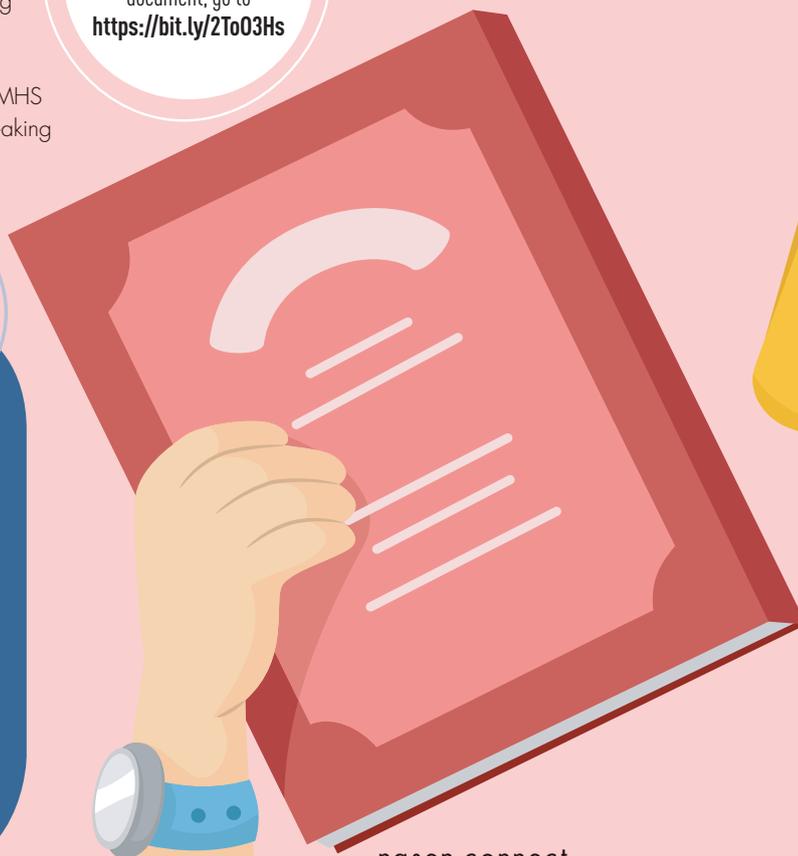


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JO EGERTON

Jo Egerton is an independent Practitioner Research Consultant and educational writer. She is engaged by Beyond Words as a part-time Research Fellow/Project Manager on the Open Book project.



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PROFESSOR BARRY CARPENTER

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delayed access to CAMHS might prevent. However, many school professionals are under-confident, under-trained and under-resourced in providing focused SEMH support to pupils.

Beyond Words is a charity that publishes meticulously trialled, wordless picture-stories, co-authored by topic specialists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists and people with learning and communication difficulties. The books provide structure and guidance notes for addressing specific and sometimes highly sensitive SEMH scenarios. Their pictures not only illustrate a story but, through strategic details, enable pupils to explore topics with complex emotional themes. The 'layered reading' approach lets pupils share their own stories if they want to, enabling staff to learn more about how pupils perceive their world, guide their understanding and identify where they need additional support.

THE OPEN BOOK PROJECT

Beyond Words has received a grant to work with 22 special schools nationally to explore how teachers and TAs can use their books to make their schools' SEMH curricula accessible for pupils who either cannot read or struggle with written words. The 'Open Book' project is divided into two phases – the first (September 2018 – August 2019) established the books as a whole-class resource for teachers, and the second (September 2019 – June 2020) supports TAs to run small group and individual SEMH interventions for pupils who need focused intervention. Phase two is in its early stages, but teachers have reported encouraging Phase one outcomes, summarised right.

Find out more about Beyond Words at <https://books.beyondwords.co.uk/>

At the beginning of Phase one, a senior leadership team member and a teacher from each school were trained in facilitating whole-class book groups. Each book group identified three 'best hoped for' learning outcomes (BHFOs) linked to the school's SEMH curriculum and individual targets. Using the Beyond Words storylines, which typically move the main character from personal difficulty through reflection to solution, teachers and TAs supported pupils to think through personal wellbeing and safety issues linked to their own experiences.

They facilitated pupils' comments, thinking and discussions around:

- ▶ The story scenario and different characters' actions, responses and feelings.
- ▶ Risks the main character took and what they might have done differently.
- ▶ How pupils could apply what they had learned in everyday life.



→ TEACHING & LEARNING

As the book groups read through the books at a pace that reflected their pupils' needs and abilities, they evidenced and reported on pupil engagement and learning in three key areas relating to their BHFOs – 'knowledge', 'making decisions' and 'being empowered' to stay safe emotionally and physically.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Over the two terms of Phase one, many teachers were surprised by the way the Beyond Words book groups provided an entrée to young people's own experiences and behavioural risks, and helped them to listen, respond and relate better to each other. The 22 schools had identified a total of 66 BHFOs that fell within four broad areas (BHFO numbers per area in brackets): friendships, relationships and personal safety (18); identification, expression and interpretation of their own and others' emotional states (14); book group participation (12); communication, sense

of self, empowerment and autonomy (10); and whole school outcomes (2). At the end of Phase one, the project leads estimated the extent to which their class groups had attained their BHFOs using a five-item numerical Likert Scale between 4 (BHFO fully achieved) and 0 (BHFO not achieved). Teachers' ratings were as follows:

- ▶ 50 BHFOs were rated as either fully achieved (23), mostly achieved (25) or between the two (2).
- ▶ 11 were rated as partially achieved.
- ▶ Five were rated as minimally (4) or not (1) achieved.

These outcomes, along with teacher comments, suggest that using relevant Beyond Words books (alongside existing SEMH approaches) had enabled the majority of pupils to achieve BHFOs relevant to their school's SEMH curriculum and individual needs.

One project school looked at 'Making Friends' – a story of a lonely young person in search of friends. The book illustrates the young person's safe and unsafe attempts to find friends, ending

happily via a series of errors and requested support. The teacher observed that through reading the book, her group gained "a greater understanding of how to recognise how other people are feeling [and]...recognise and describe [emotion-related] body language and facial expressions". She concluded: "This has empowered them to be able to help each other more. As part of further learning in our Healthy Minds sessions, the students have participated in role play activities on what to do if they think someone is feeling sad or lonely."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND DECLARATION OF INTEREST:

Our thanks to all 22 Open Book project schools for participating and to Barr's Court School, Hereford, for the quotations. Beyond Words has received charitable funding to convene the Open Book project and to engage a part-time independent Research Fellow/Project Manager. Beyond Words also provides schools with free copies of books used within the project.



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PROFESSOR SHEILA HOLLINS

Professor Sheila, the Baroness Hollins, is Convener of the Open Book Project. She is founder and Chair of Beyond Words, and Editor and Lead Author of the Books Beyond Words series. She is Emeritus Professor of the Psychiatry of Disability at St George's, University of London, and sits in the House of Lords as a crossbench peer.



References Department for Education (DfE)/Department of Health (DH) (2015) *SEND Code of Practice: 0–25 years*. London: DfE. Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC)/Department for Education (DfE) (2017) *Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision* (Green Paper). London: DfE. Emerson, E. and Hatton, C. (2007) *The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents with Learning Disabilities in Britain*. London: Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities/ Lancaster University. Hollins, S., Roth, T. and Webb, B. (2015) *Making Friends (2nd edn)*. London: Books Beyond Words. National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) (2008) *Promoting Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing in Primary Education*. London: NICE.