



Community Foundation Post-Project Report

Exploring the benefits of storytelling-based wellbeing and emotional education programmes across primary schools in Northern Ireland

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| Executive Summary

This project was delivered by Verbal with support from the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland. Verbal designed and delivered two Shared Reading programmes within schools across Northern Ireland. While the Building Resilience programme aimed to improve resilience in children aged 8-11 years, the Managing Difficult Emotions programme aimed to help children aged 6-9 years understand and manage their emotions.

Providing young children with these skills is vital in the context of relatively poor childhood mental health in Northern Ireland (Bunting et al., 2020) and funding cuts to mental health services in schools that are posited to leave children “without vital support” (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2023).

The programme adopted a whole-school approach. Sessions were delivered by teachers and supported by classroom assistants. Programme delivery was carried out in 20 schools between September 2022-June 2023, reaching a total of 482 students.

The Building Resilience programme improved resilience and mental wellbeing in 46% of children and 44% of children respectively. The programme significantly helped children to feel closer to others and encouraged help-seeking behaviour. Children felt more energised and enthusiastic about their lives after taking part.

The Managing Difficult Emotions programme improved wellbeing by 36% and improved the ability to understand and manage emotions in 47% of children. Children particularly improved in their ability to self-soothe when upset, in identifying their strengths, and in empathising with others. The youngest children significantly improved their ability to persevere when struggling in school.

Programme feedback was positive from both children and teachers. Children enjoyed stories and illustrations and felt listened to during classroom discussions. Children learned lessons from stories such as being kind to themselves and others and what they should do when they are feeling overwhelmed. Teachers used stories to reinforce school values and would lead to so much discussion that teachers would plan follow-up lessons for additional learning.

Our programmes improved mental wellbeing, boosted resilience, and helped children to understand and manage their emotions in an enjoyable and relatable manner. These findings indicate that Verbal's programmes are effective in improving children's mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, they suggest that Shared Reading can both improve mental wellbeing and embed mental health knowledge and support directly within schools, helping to reduce stigma and to make mental health support more accessible.

I Introduction

One in eight young people in Northern Ireland (NI) are exhibiting symptoms of depression or anxiety, a finding that is 25% higher than other regions of the United Kingdom (Bunting et al., 2020). In response to relatively high rates of poor wellbeing in NI, the first theme of the NI Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 is to *promote mental wellbeing, resilience, and good mental health across society* (Department of Health, 2021).

Research indicates that the promoting and improving of mental health should begin as early as possible as symptoms of mental health problems such as anxiety can appear by the age of six (Merikangas et al., 2010). Despite the importance of early mental health interventions, funding cuts in NI have impacted the capacity to provide wellbeing resources in schools. The loss of the Healthy Happy Minds programme in 2023 has resulted in primary schools losing access to mental health support such as counsellors and creative therapy support, leaving children “without vital support” (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2023).

In the context of poor childhood wellbeing and funding cuts in NI, Verbal have worked to develop interventions informed by the current Mental Health Strategy. For example, promoting resilience has been highlighted as a key component of the strategy. Resilience refers to the ability to use available internal and external resources to manage and overcome difficult challenges (Pooley & Cohen, 2010).

To improve resilience, it is important to both equip people with a skillset for managing difficulties (known as personal resilience) while also encouraging them to seek help and rely on others (known as relational resilience). We developed a mental health and wellbeing storytelling programme titled ‘Building Resilience’ to improve mental wellbeing and to teach components of personal and relational resilience to children aged 8-11 years.

Along with our Building Resilience programme, we developed an early intervention programme specifically for younger school-aged children to help in understanding and managing challenging emotions and behaviours. This programme, titled ‘Managing Difficult Emotions’, was designed to help children aged 6-9 years to manage current distress while also providing a skillset of coping strategies to use when faced with future stressors.

The overall aims of the Building Resilience programme are to foster resilience and improve mental wellbeing in children aged 8-11 years, while the Managing Difficult Emotions programme aims to enhance emotional wellbeing and help children aged 6-9 years better manage their emotions and behaviours. This report will evaluate the effectiveness of these programmes in achieving these aims across primary schools in NI.

Methods

Programmes

Verbal’s collaboration with Community Foundation NI took place in two phases encompassing two different interventions. Phase One of the collaboration involved the development of a 24-session intervention titled ‘Building Resilience’. This intervention was designed to improve resilience and mental wellbeing in primary school children aged between 8-11 years. This curriculum aimed to instil the following tenets of resilience and emotional wellbeing:



Emotional awareness and thinking straight



Problem-solving and learning from mistakes



Empathy and compassion



Self-image and self-esteem



Gratitude and self-care



Happiness, wellbeing and a hopeful outlook

Phase Two of the collaboration focused on developing a 20-session intervention titled ‘Developing Healthy Relationships’. This intervention was designed to improve mental wellbeing and help children to manage their emotions for children aged 6-9 years. The Managing Difficult Emotions Programme aimed to instil the following tenets of good mental wellbeing and emotional awareness in children:



Managing unhelpful thoughts



Naming emotions



Compassion and self-care



Relaxation and distraction techniques



Building self-esteem



Gratitude and positive wellbeing



Managing worries and facing fears



Friendships and bullying

Participating Schools

Nine schools took part in Phase One of the project while eleven schools took part in Phase Two. These schools are:

Phase One	Phase Two
Ballysally Primary School	Ballysally Primary School
Longtower Primary School	Longtower Primary School
Roe Valley Integrated Primary School	Roe Valley Integrated Primary School
Sion Mills Primary School	St John's Primary School, Dernaflaw
St John's Primary School, Dernaflaw	Harpur's Hill Primary School
Harpur's Hill Primary School	St Ronan's Lisnaskea
Our Lady of Fatima, Listress	St Canice's Primary School
St Brigid's Primary School, Carnhill	Our Lady of Fatima, Listress
Holy Trinity Primary School	St Columba's, New Buildings
	Glendermott Primary School
	St Brigid's Primary School

Shared Reading Model

This intervention was developed using Verbal's Shared Reading Model. This model is derived from Affective Bibliotherapy (Shechtman & Nir-Shfir, 2008, Heath et al., 2005), a process involving the guided reading of literature combined with targeted discussions. Shared Reading fosters change and understanding in others by gently breaking through defence mechanisms to help develop insight (Shechtman & Nir-Shfir, 2008). Stories act as an “intermediary object” between the person and their problems (Gray et al., 2016), offering a less direct but appropriate way of discussing their emotions and experiences in a safe and inclusive environment (Detrixhe, 2010).

Programme Development

Literature was selected by Verbal's Literature Team to align with the mental health themes previously outlined. In the Shared Reading Model, discussions are guided by psychologically-informed annotations written by Verbal's Psychology Team to prompt personal and group growth, healing and understanding. These annotations are guided by key psychological frameworks, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to change unhealthy thoughts and behaviours, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to accept and/or change emotions and behaviours.

This programme was delivered in schools by teachers and teachers in training. Encouraging teachers to become involved in Shared Reading is part of Verbal's whole-school approach to improving wellbeing in schools. Our aim was to equip teachers, classroom assistants and support staff with sustainable resources that they could integrate into their daily school life. We also encouraged teachers and classroom assistants to become involved in discussions, to empower the children in their class to share their voice, and to continue discussions and lessons outside of the session.

Programme Assessment

Participants completed a questionnaire before and after taking part in the intervention; these questionnaires contained the same psychological measures to allow direct comparison pre- and post-intervention. To account for age differences and differences in programme aims, children completed different measures depending on whether they completed the Building Resilience (Phase One) or Managing Difficult Emotions (Phase Two) programmes. These measures are:



Phase 1: World Health Organisation-5 (WHO-5) Well-Being Index

This is a five-item measure designed to assess psychological wellbeing and quality of life (Bech, 2004). High scores are indicative of positive wellbeing and a high quality of life. The WHO-5 has been used in a range of studies worldwide and is a useful measure for recognising symptoms of depression in young people (Topp, Østergaard, Sondergaard, & Bech, 2015).



Phase 1: Child & Youth Resilience Measure-Revised (CYRM-R)

The CYRM-R is a 17-item measure to assess resilience in children and young people, with high scores indicating high resilience (Resilience Research Centre, 2018; Jeffries, McGarrigle, & Ungar, 2018). Along with summing scores to create an overall resilience score, the CYRM-R contains two subscales related to resilience: personal and relational resilience. Personal resilience refers to a young person's sense of self and how they relate to the world around them. Relational resilience relates to a young person's quality of relationships and the ability to rely on others in times of need.



Phase 2: Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (SCWBS)

This is a 12-item measure which uses positively-worded questions to assess children's emotional state and outlook on life (Liddle & Carter, 2015). For this project, the six questions relating to positive emotional state were used in our questionnaire. High scores are indicative of children feeling positive, hopeful, and getting along well with others.



Phase 2: Nfer-Nelson Emotional Literacy Scale

This is a 25-item measure designed to assess emotional literacy in children (Faupel, 2003). For this project, ten questions in total were selected from the empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation and motivation subscales as they most closely aligned with the aims and goals of the programme. High scores indicate that children are able to recognise and manage their emotions.

Along with a pre- and post-intervention survey, we developed a range of ways to capture programme feedback from young children and their teachers. These feedback options include:



Weekly Teacher Feedback Form

Each week, teachers were emailed the URL to a survey to provide feedback on the session that they had delivered. Teachers were asked to rate: how successful they thought the story was at achieving its intended aim; the level of classroom engagement; the depth of conversation; the ease of delivering the session; whether the story's key theme was identified; and whether teachers had any additional comments or feedback on delivering the session.



End-of-Programme Questionnaire

At the end of Phase One, children provided feedback through an end-of-programme questionnaire. This questionnaire asked children: if they liked the storytelling sessions; what they enjoyed most about the programme; how the programme made them feel; whether they felt listened to during the programme; the story they enjoyed the most; and what children learned from the stories.



Classroom End-of-Programme Survey

At the end of Phase Two, classrooms completed a number of 'hands-up' exercises that were read aloud by their teacher. For example, teachers would ask children 'Did you enjoy listening to the stories?' and would tally the number of children who raised their hand at 'yes', 'not sure', and 'no'. Questions asked children whether they: enjoyed listening to the stories; whether they felt happier after listening to stories; whether they felt listened to during discussions; what they enjoyed most about the programme; what lessons they learned from the programme; and whether they would take part again.



End-of-Programme Activity Sheet

As gathering feedback from young children can be challenging, we designed an interactive activity sheet for the end of Phase Two to learn more about how they found the programme. Children were encouraged to: draw and/or describe their favourite story from the programme; circle from a list of options what they felt they had learned from the programme; and colour in the emotions they felt while listening to stories.

Procedure

This programme was delivered in schools between September 2022-June 2023. Parental consent forms were sent out to parents which contained information about the programme and were collected prior to the beginning of the programme. Children completed the pre-programme questionnaire before the beginning of the first session.

Each session, children would be read a story pertaining to themes of wellbeing and emotional literacy. Stories were selected by Verbal's Literature Team and structured breaks were implemented for discussions and for showing illustrations related to the story events in Phase Two. The Psychology team developed questions for these breaks that would encourage discussion and reflection on the theme. The programme was delivered by teachers, typically on a weekly basis where possible. Children completed the post-intervention questionnaire and feedback exercises at the end of the programme.

Data Analysis Strategy

Quantitative data were entered, cleaned and statistically analysed by the Verbal Psychology Team using a combination of SPSS Version 28 and Stata Version 17.

Descriptive statistics such as age and gender were explored. t-tests were used to explore whether scores on psychological measures significantly changed before and after taking part in the intervention, including by age and gender. Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVAs) were then used to explore whether changes in scores pre- and post-intervention significantly differed by age or gender.

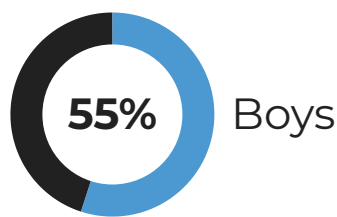
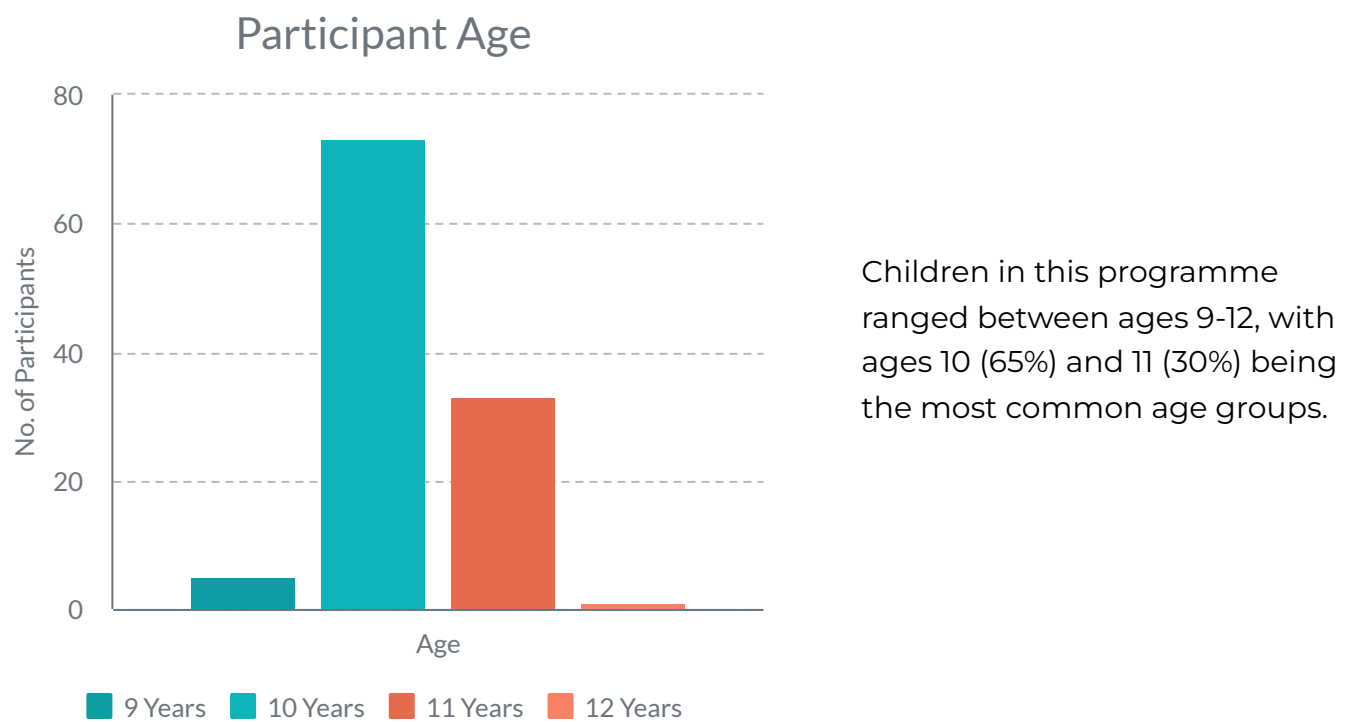
Statistical significance was explored when analysing data. Statistical significance refers to the probability that a finding happened due to a specific cause, most likely the result of the programme. In alignment with established guidelines, results were considered as statistically significant if $p < .05$. This means that we can be at least 95% sure that a finding was not due to chance or coincidence. Statistically significant findings in charts and graphs were denoted using an asterisk (*).



Results: Participant Overview

Participant Information: Phase One

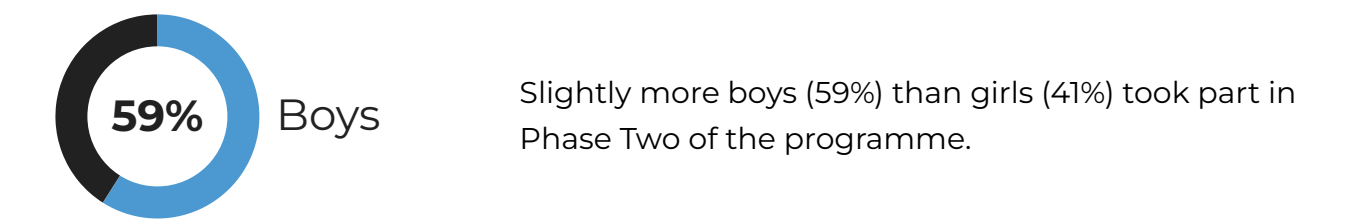
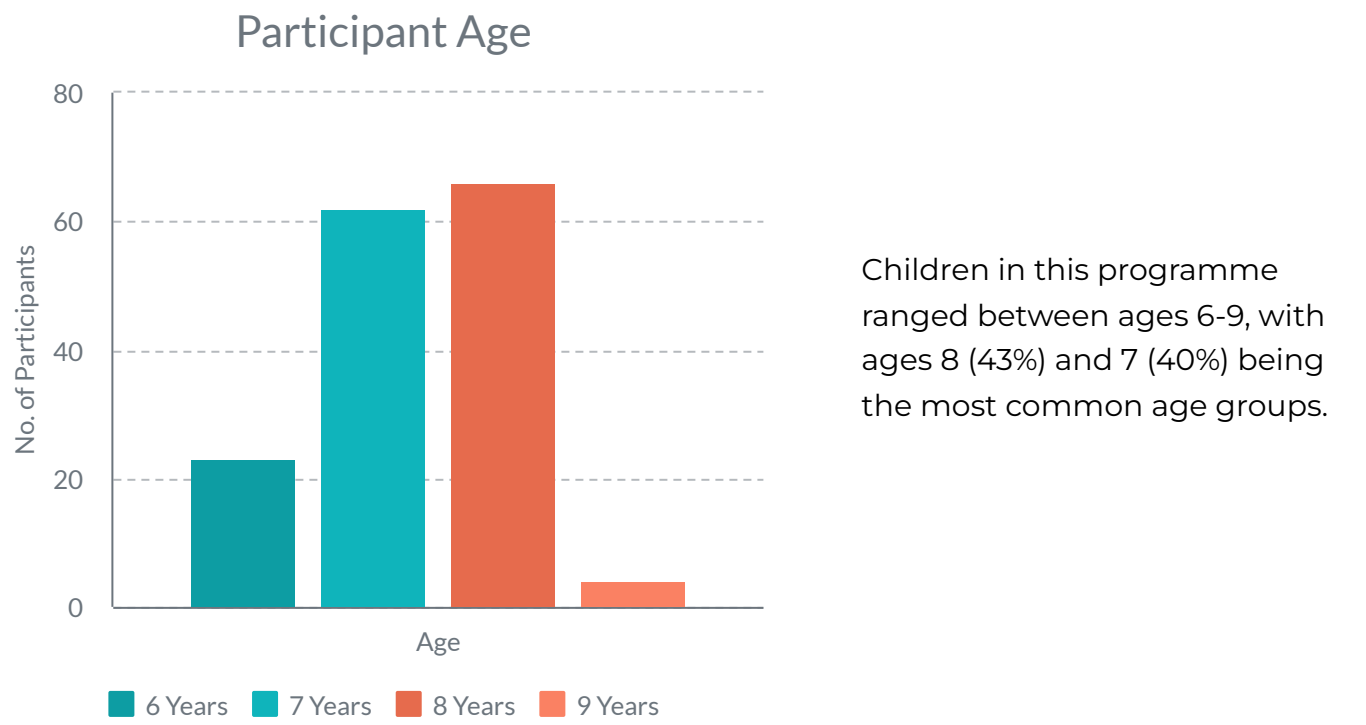
This phase was delivered in nine schools between September 2022-June 2023. The programme reached a total of **210 students**. A parental consent form, a pre-programme questionnaire, and a post-programme questionnaire were available for **112 participants (53%)**.



Slightly more boys (55%) than girls (45%) took part in Phase One of the programme.

Participant Information: Phase Two

This phase was delivered in eleven schools between September 2022-June 2023. The programme reached a total of **272 students**. A parental consent form, a pre-programme questionnaire, and a post-programme questionnaire were available for **155 participants (57%)**.



Results: Mental Wellbeing

Programme Results: Phase One

In Phase One of the programme, we found that mental wellbeing **increased in 44% of children**. After taking part, **46% of children** reported that they **felt more energised** and **42% felt more interested** in things in their daily life.

↑ **44%**

Improved their
mental wellbeing

↑ **46%**

Felt more energised

↑ **42%**

Felt more interested
in their lives

Programme Results: Phase Two

↑ **36%**

Improved their
mental wellbeing

In Phase Two of the programme, we found that mental wellbeing **increased in 36% of children**.

Results: Resilience

Programme Results

↑ **46%**

Became more resilient

Phase One aimed to improve mental wellbeing and resilience in children. We found that by the end of the programme, resilience **improved in 46% of children.**

When exploring different types of resilience, seeing others as a source of help and support (caregiver resilience) **significantly increased in 56% of children** ($t=2.32$, $p=.011$), and **36% of children improved** their ability to manage difficulties (personal resilience).

↑ **56%**

Felt more supported by others

↑ **36%**

Felt more able to manage difficulties

When exploring individual survey questions, we found that the programme particularly helped children to feel closer to their families. For example, **36% of children** were more likely to feel that their family cared about them, **31% of children** were more likely to talk to their family about how they felt, and **26% of children** felt more fairly treated at home.

↑ **36%**

Felt more supported by their family

↑ **31%**

More likely to discuss feelings with family

↑ **26%**

Increase in feeling treated fairly at home

Results: Managing Emotions

Programme Results

↑ **47%**

Improved in managing emotions

Phase Two aimed to improve mental wellbeing and to help young children understand and manage their emotions. We found that by the end of the programme, the ability to recognise and manage emotions **improved in 47% of children.**

We explored which components of emotional education were most effective in young children. The largest increase was a **36% improvement** in being able to regulate their emotions and self-soothe. Both the ability to understand their personal strengths and the ability to empathise and understand the emotions of others **improved in 32% of children.**

↑ **36%**

Felt more able to regulate their emotions

↑ **32%**

Felt more able to identify their personal strengths

↑ **32%**

Improved their empathy skills

When exploring individual survey questions, we found that children were **32% less likely** to get upset if they were not doing well at something in school and were **27% less likely** to be hurt by unkind words.

↑ **32%**

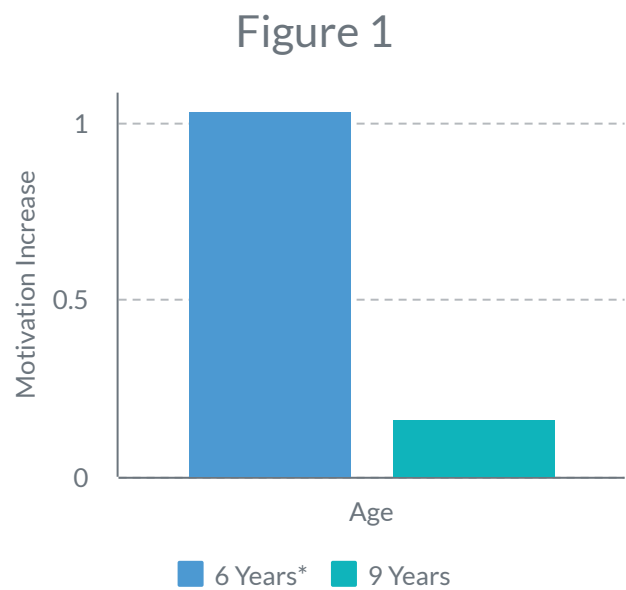
Increase in perseverance

↓ **27%**

Less likely to be hurt by words

Exploring Demographic Differences

Analyses explored whether age or gender differences were apparent between the pre- and post-intervention assessments.

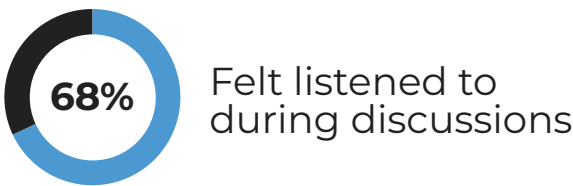


We found a significant difference in motivation by age ($F=4.08, p=.008$). Results shown in Figure 1 indicate that our programme **helped younger children to persevere** when they were finding something challenging.

Results: Child Feedback

Phase One

In Phase One, end-of-programme feedback sheets were collected from **102 children (49%)**.



Felt listened to during discussions

68% of children felt that they were being listened to during the discussion portions of the sessions.



Enjoyed listening to stories

65% of children enjoyed listening to stories during sessions.



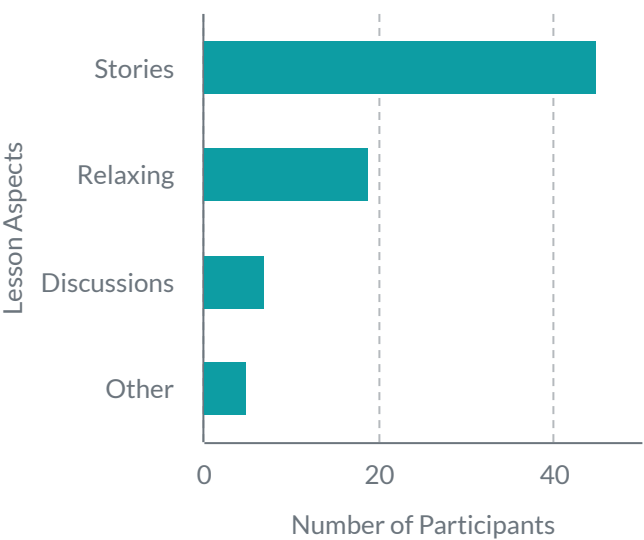
Felt happier after stories

When asked if they felt happier after hearing the stories, **49% of children answered yes**. **41% of children** reported that they felt better about themselves and the things in their life after sessions, and **35% of children** noticed that their classmates were in a better mood after story sessions.

Children were asked to write down what they enjoyed most about the programme; these responses were collated and are presented in Figure 2.

Children most enjoyed stories being read to them, praising “*how interesting the stories were*” and liking “*the themes of the stories*”. Children appreciated being able to relax while stories were read to them, feeling “*that it was calming*” and enjoying “*being relaxed*”. The discussion portion of sessions were also praised as children enjoyed “*the questions at the end of storylines*”, “*discussing the stories*” and “*answering questions*”. Other reasons for enjoying the programme included “*getting to learn stuff*” and “*getting to work with friends*”.

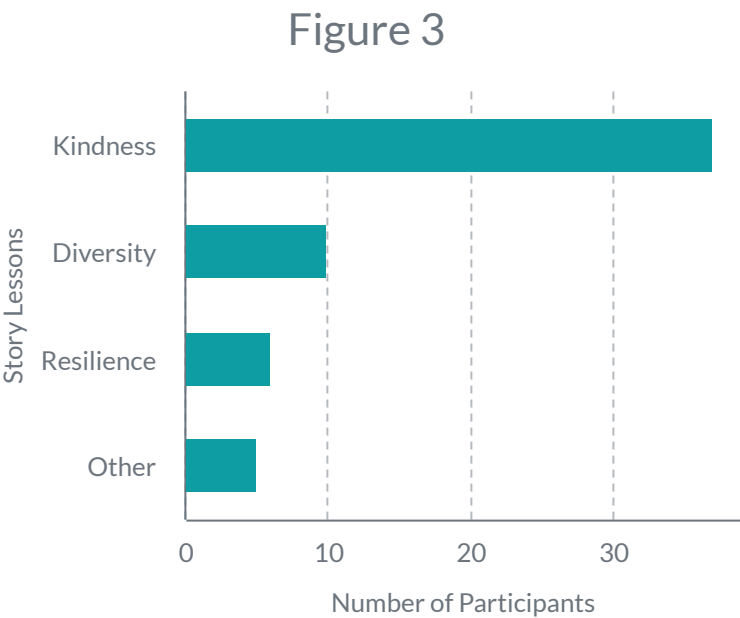
Figure 2



Children were asked which stories they enjoyed the most and to name as many as they liked. While stories such as Wonder, The Brave Tin Soldier and The Special Pumpkin seemed popular with children, the open-ended nature of this question led to children saying that they were unsure and could not remember specific titles. Following this feedback, we revised how we collect information on favourite stories from children and applied this learning to Phase Two.

A further open-ended question asked children to write down what they felt they had learned from the stories. These responses were quantified and are presented in Figure 3.

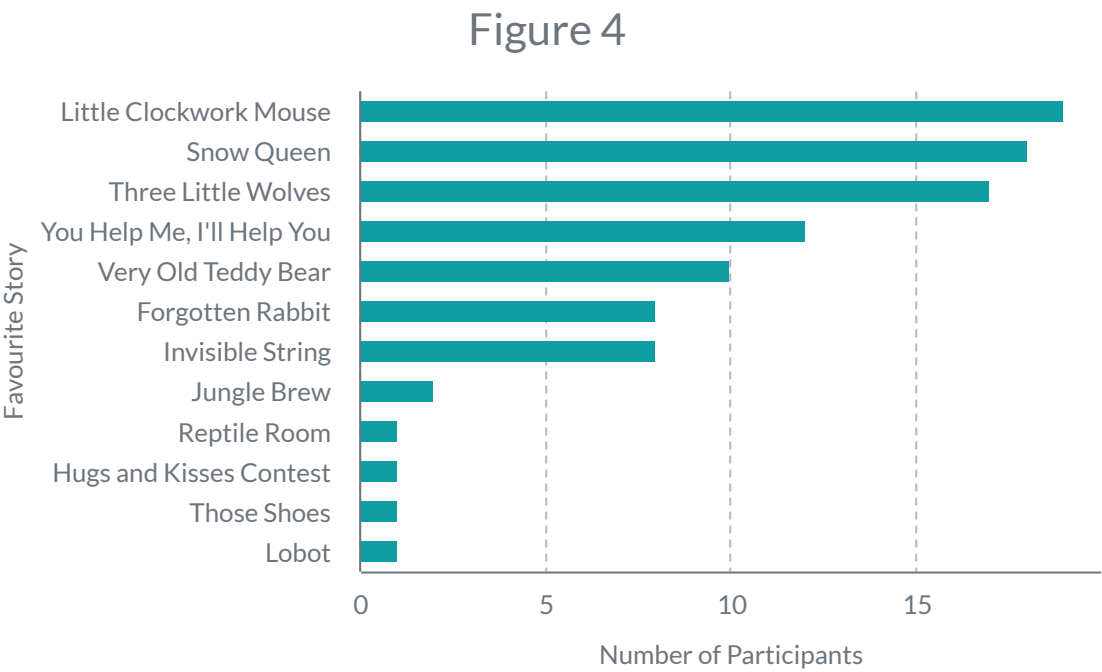
The importance of being kind to others was the most prevalent lesson learned from the stories as children stressed the importance of “*always be[ing] kind and respectful*” and “*help[ing] others*”. Stories taught children lessons on diversity and acceptance, including “*not to judge a book by its cover*”, “*that everyone is different*”, and “*people are all beautiful*”. Several components of personal resilience were mentioned in feedback such as “*to be confident*”, “*to be brave*”, and “*never give up and to keep on going*”. Other lessons that children learned from the story sessions include “*to listen*”, “*to be grateful for what I have*”, “*to think about things*”, and that “*there can be sadness but a happy ending*”.



Phase Two: Activity Sheet

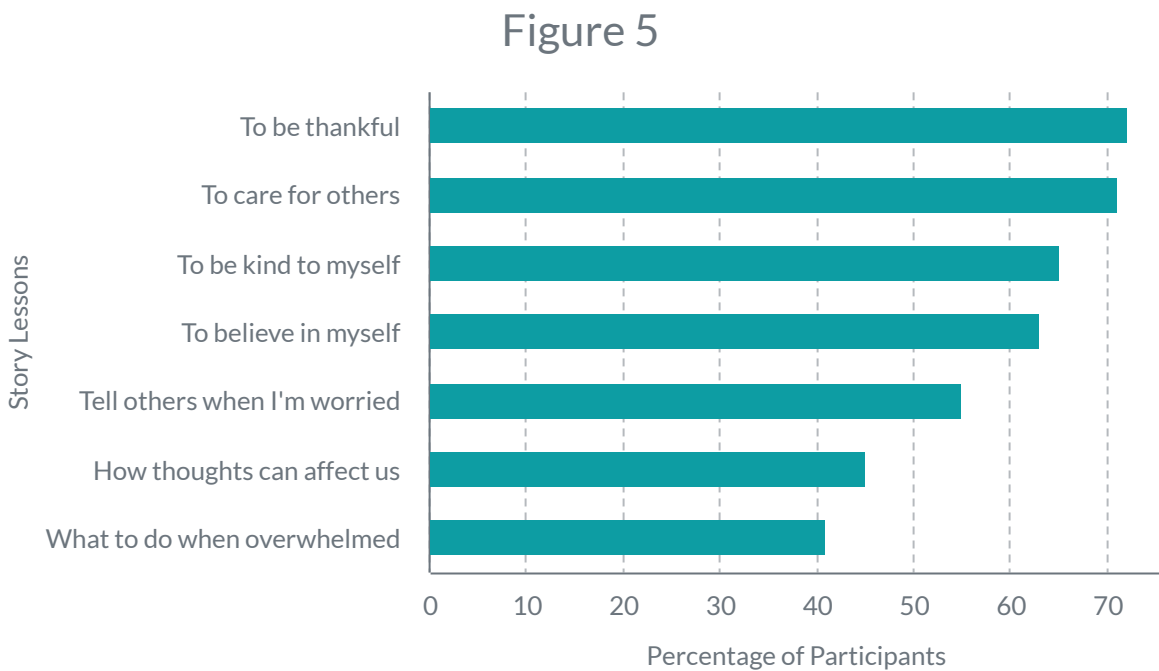
In Phase Two, child feedback was collected from an age-appropriate end-of-programme activity sheet: activity sheets were collected from **100 (37%) children**.

Children were asked to draw pictures from and/or describe their favourite story. Drawings and descriptions were collated and organised in Figure 4.



The most popular story was **The Little Clockwork Mouse (19%)**, a story detailing and resolving the titular mouse not being invited to a party. Following this story was **The Snow Queen (18%)** about a girl saving her friend from the trickery of The Snow Queen, followed by **The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig (17%)**, a subversion of the classic fairytale where the wolves and the pig become friends. Stories such as **The Very Old Teddy Bear (10%)** and **The Forgotten Rabbit (8%)** were enjoyed for encouraging kindness and compassion alongside showing the harm of bullying and discrimination.

Children were provided with a list of lessons that the programme taught them and could circle the lessons that they felt they had learned. The percentage of circled answers can be seen in Figure 5.

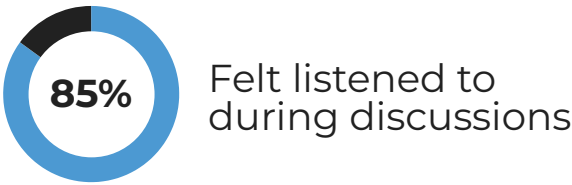


Gratitude, self-love and kindness were popular lessons that the children had learned. Over half of children learned the importance of help-seeking and talking to others when they are experiencing negative emotions. Over a third of children felt that they had learned how to calm and soothe themselves when they are feeling overwhelmed.

Finally, children were asked how they felt when listening to stories. **62% of children** felt that listening to stories helped them feel calm, while **51% of children** felt happy when listening to stories.

Phase Two: Classroom Feedback

In Phase Two, end-of-programme classroom feedback was gathered from **6 schools (54%)** with a total of **125 students (46%)** in attendance.



Felt listened to during discussions

85% of children felt that they were being listened to during the discussion portions of the sessions.



Enjoyed listening to stories

84% of children felt that they enjoyed listening to stories during sessions.



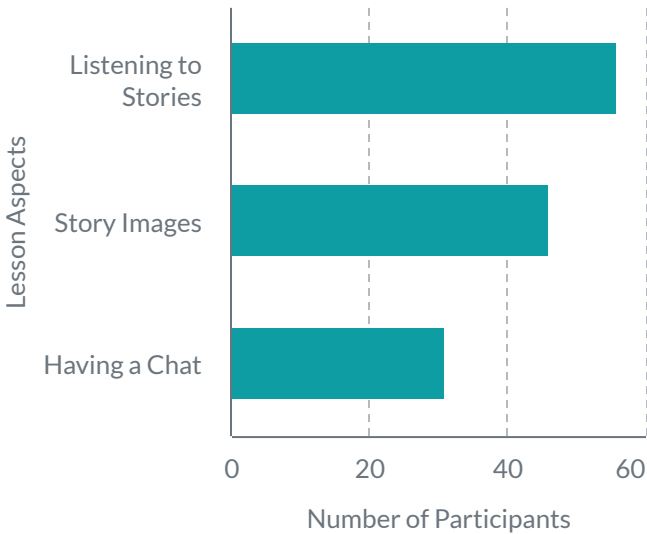
Felt happier after stories

When children were asked if they felt happier after hearing the stories, **54% responded yes..**

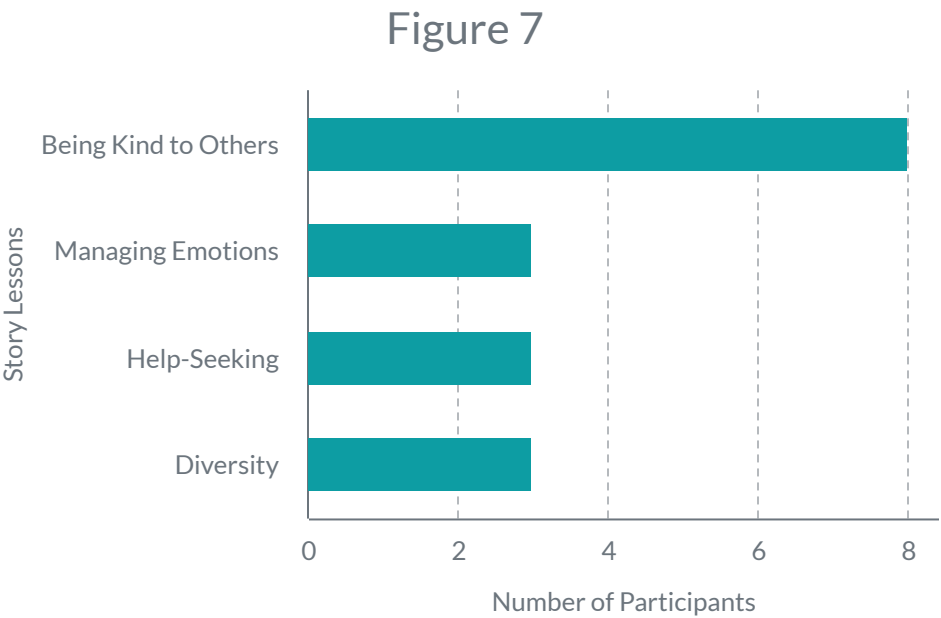
Children were asked to pick which aspect of the sessions they enjoyed the most; these responses are shown in Figure 6. Please note that while these answers aimed to be mutually exclusive, some children raised their hand for multiple answers and were therefore counted more than once.

The most popular aspect of the programme was being able to sit back and listen to a story being told (**45%**). Children also enjoyed the accompanying illustrations that were projected on the whiteboard which corresponded to events in the story (**37%**). Finally, **25% of children** enjoyed the ability to have a chat about the story, their feelings, and how they could personally relate to events unfolding in the story.

Figure 6

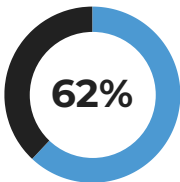


Teachers asked children in the class what they learned from the stories. A summary of responses is shown in Figure 7.



The lesson that children most frequently took from the programme was to be kind to others. Children shared feedback on how important it is to “*spread love*”, “*always help others*” and to “*trust each other*”, believing that “*love is the biggest thing in the world*”. Children learned lessons on their emotions and how to manage them, learning that “*all feelings are okay*” and that “*everyone has feelings, you can and are allowed to feel [them]*”.

Children also learned the importance of help-seeking and how you should “*talk to trusted adults*” and “*talk about feelings*”. Diversity emerged as a theme as children shared morals such as “*we are all different*”, “*everyone is unique*”, and “*it doesn’t matter what you look like, it’s what’s inside that counts*”.

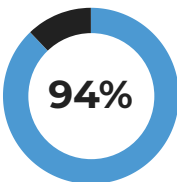


Would take part again

62% of children felt that they would like to take part in the programme again.

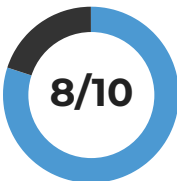
Results: Teacher Feedback

Each week, teachers were asked to complete an online survey after session delivery. Questions asked teachers to rate the success of the story, the level of engagement, the depth of conversation, the ease of delivering the session, whether the story's key theme was identified, and whether they had any additional comments or feedback on delivering the session. These numbers were averaged for both Phases One and Two to give an overall impression across the weeks and are detailed below:



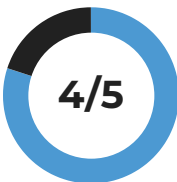
Identification of theme in story

Children were very often able to identify the theme and learning objective of the session.



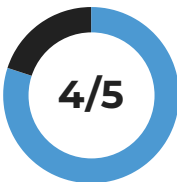
Average story success

Teacher feedback indicates high classroom engagement with a great depth of conversation throughout.

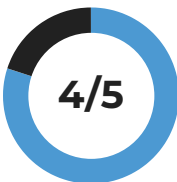


Average classroom engagement

Teachers found most sessions easy to deliver with children enjoying the stories they were delivering.



Average depth of conversation



Average ease of session delivery



Comments provided by teachers throughout Phases One and Two were collated and organised to identify themes from delivering the programme. These themes are:

Story Enjoyment

“

Many are chatting about the story at play time which is brilliant!

Teachers shared feedback that children “*really enjoyed*” the story sessions and how “*many are chatting about [stories] at play time which is brilliant!*”. Children were enthusiastic about the programme as teachers shared feedback that children were asking “*when we were starting the next story*”. The programme also helped to promote literacy as “*children enjoyed this story and some now want to read the novel*”.

“

Children enjoyed this story and some now want to read the novel.

Feedback provided insight into why children enjoyed the stories. Several teachers felt that stories were “*very appropriate*” and included a “*nice simple narrative at [the] correct level*”. Children liked stories that were “*not as predictable as the class thought!*” and enjoyed stories such as The Three Little Wolves and The Big Bad Pig that put a “*twist on this classic story*”, leaving feedback such as “*the children enjoyed this one as it was full of humour*”.

Story Engagement

Children were “*really engaged*” by stories and class discussions. Teachers highlighted topics that children were eager to engage with during sessions, such as “*a lot of discussion and interaction around the theme of helping others*” and “*so much engagement [around] the theme of empathy*”.

Engaging in discussions gradually helped shy children to participate with the class as teachers provided feedback such as “*children who don’t usually answer got involved in discussions*”.

“

There was a lot of discussion and interaction around the theme of helping others.

“

Children who don’t usually answer got involved in discussions.

Relating to Stories

“

The children really connected to the story, characters and thoughts and emotions which were generated throughout the tale.

A particular element of the programme that children enjoyed was the ability to relate to characters and their experiences. Teachers felt that “*the children really connected to the story, characters and thoughts and emotions which were generated throughout the tale*”.

Children related to a range of story elements across the programme. These include positive elements such as “*their own experiences of when they helped others or when others helped them*”. However, stories could allow for more open and candid conversations to happen in the classroom. These conversations include “*situations [with] their own sibling*”, “*experiences when trying out for a football team or when entering a competition*”, and “*divorce/pet topics*”.

“

We absolutely loved this one and could relate to it extremely well with 2 children with hearing impairment in our class.

Our story selection aimed to include a diverse range of characters and experiences. The story of Lobot follows Auggie and his journey of receiving hearing aids as he fears he will look like Lobot the Robot. This story was “*absolutely loved*” by a class as they “*could relate to it extremely well with 2 children with hearing impairment in our class. We have 1 child on the journey of having hearing aids fitted*”.

Discussing Emotions and Positive Actions

Two themes that emerged from teacher feedback were the ability for children to talk about their “*feelings and emotions*”, and the importance of positive actions such as kindness.

Children discussed their emotions and tenets of positive wellbeing such “*the importance of self esteem and confidence*” and “*being positive about ourselves*”. Conversations also focused on “*seeing the positives in other people*” as positive actions were a popular topic of discussion.

Lessons learned from stories include “*it is good to celebrate differences*” and “*how we should celebrate being different rather than making fun of others who are different*”. Children particularly enjoyed stories with a heavy focus on kindness, enjoying when characters “*became friends and were spreading kindness like the other stories*”.

“

We had a great discussion about being positive about ourselves and seeing the positives in other people.

“

Children really loved this story and were able to come to the conclusion that not everyone has to be the same and that it is good to celebrate differences.

Extended Learning

“

This story tied in with our school value of thankfulness...this is a set of characters and a story we will refer to while doing this task.

As the weeks progressed, sessions offered teachers opportunities for extended learning in their classroom. This extended learning came in the form of further discussions on current school material and providing opportunities for students to learn new things.

Sessions helped to extend current school learning in several ways. One session included a story that was previously a classroom novel, and “*the children really enjoyed revisiting this section of the book for an in-depth discussion*”.

Some stories featured themes such as being grateful for what we have, and these stories tied in with a teacher’s “*school value of thankfulness*”. The teacher subsequently felt that “*this is a set of characters and a story we will refer to while doing this task*”, providing resources for teachers to help reinforce their school values.

Sessions could help teachers identify avenues for further learning and discussion in their class. One story helped a teacher to realise that “*self-esteem wasn’t familiar to [my class]*” and planned “*further lessons*” to help reinforce this learning. Another teacher reported that a session on “*different family units...created so much discussion I then extended it to have a follow up lesson....which the children got a lot out of.*”

“

This story...created so much discussion I then extended it to have a follow up lesson in written and practical form which the children got a lot out of.

Teacher Impressions and Feedback

“

The children enjoyed the story and are always great at picking up on the themes.

When providing feedback, teachers would share their own experiences such as “*I enjoyed delivering this one also*”, “*Another great story*”, and “*A lovely story with great themes*”. Teachers praised the psychologically-informed questions used to encourage discussion, describing them as “*helpful*” for session delivery.

One sentiment that was expressed across the weeks was teachers being impressed by the capabilities of their class. For example, a Lobot session was described as “*a deeply personal one for us*” as several children in the class are hearing impaired. While the teacher felt “*nervous tackling it*”, “*the kids surprised [them] no end*” and left the teacher feeling that the session was a “*brilliant one*”.

Teacher feedback also provided an avenue for constructive feedback. In Phase One, we received teacher feedback that “*illustrations to go with the stories would be great!*”. This encouraged us to commission artists to create accompanying story images that would be shown in the classroom during Phase Two story sessions. We monitored Phase Two feedback for comments relating to the images and are presented next.

“

This was a deeply personal one for us [as some children in the class are hearing impaired] and I was nervous tackling it. The kids surprised me no end. Brilliant one.

Benefits of Images



My class really enjoyed this story and were fully engaged. The illustrated slides definitely helped with engagement.

Phase Two feedback indicates that the inclusion of images was a great benefit to the programme. Images were popular with children as teachers would describe how they “*really loved the PowerPoint [of images]*” and “*loved this story and especially the illustration*”.

Teachers felt that there were two key benefits to images: visualisation and engagement. Multiple teachers shared how “*the children really like having the illustrations to help visualise the story*”. A teacher shared how they felt that their classroom being so engaged with the story was helped by the illustrations provided: “*My class really enjoyed this story and were fully engaged. The illustrated slides definitely helped with engagement*”.



The children really like having the illustrations to help visualise the story.

Results: Advisory Panel

In Phase One of the programme, we received feedback that story sessions would benefit from the inclusion of images to help capture attention. This feedback was implemented in Phase Two to very positive feedback. With the aim of gaining additional feedback to improve our programmes and support teachers in improving childhood wellbeing, we held an advisory panel in August 2023 which was attended by five teachers from across NI. We asked teachers about their experiences delivering the programme, avenues for improvement, and the topics they would like future programmes to address in their classroom. Their feedback has been summarised and is presented below.

Positive Feedback

Teachers once again praised the stories and images delivered across the programme for their ability to engage children, with one teacher saying “*They run to the carpet when it’s time to read the stories*”.

The panel echoed previous feedback of teachers being pleasantly surprised at the emotional intelligence of their class. Teachers were “*shocked*” at how well the children recognised key themes and identified all major discussion points that the psychologically-informed annotations guided them towards.

The responsiveness of Verbal’s Project Team was praised regarding a teacher’s concern that a bereavement-focused story would be too upsetting due to recent events in their classroom. The team provided this teacher with an alternative story for this week which the teacher was grateful for.

Story Length

Teachers liked the length of the stories, particularly for Phase Two’s Managing Difficult Emotions programme. However, teachers also felt that future programmes could benefit from shorter stories as these would really help with maintaining children’s attention. The panel were happy with the idea that each story section (before discussion breaks) should be one A4 page in length.

Story Realism

We included a wide range of stories in each programme, including: different countries and cultures, stories featuring animals and humans, and stories with different levels of realism and fantasy elements. In the more fantastical stories, teachers found themselves trying to use real life scenarios to help the children understand the moral of the story and relate it to their own lives.

The panel felt that where possible, stories should focus on experiences that are relatable to children. For example, one teacher mentioned how football can be a source of fallout in young boys; a story relating to sports may help these boys to apply the morals of the story to their own lives.

Programme Delivery

The panel felt that the overall delivery of the programme could be improved in two ways. Firstly, teachers requested a small change to the format of the parent information sheet. This sheet provided an overview of the programme their child would be participating in (with their consent) along with the key themes that the programme would be touching upon. Moving forward, teachers would prefer for the parent information sheet to describe each session theme rather than providing an overview of the programme's key themes. This would help reassure teachers that parents are happy for a topic to be covered during the programme.

Secondly, teachers expressed a preference for digital forms of information sharing and data collection wherever possible. For example, parental consent was obtained from pages that were physically printed, signed and returned by parents. The panel gave recommendations on how this could be performed digitally, such as a digital form linked through the school's information system or via a school SMS.

Future Programmes

The panel provided feedback on which programmes they would like to see next and the topics they would like to see covered in future programmes. They felt that upcoming programmes are vital in the context of Healthy Happy Minds budget cuts which has limited the emotional support that children in their class receive. This is presenting a challenge to the panel as children in their classroom are already displaying symptoms of anxiety. Two main themes emerged from these discussions.

Firstly, the panel would like to see more lessons which emphasise the consequences behind actions. Teachers felt that children “*lack a sense of self-awareness*” and “*feel like it is all about them*”, leading to them not understanding how their behaviour and actions affect other children in their class. Teachers felt that more lessons need to be dedicated to the separation between emotions and behaviours. For example, “*being angry is okay but kicking is not*”. Further lessons in this topic could address faulty thoughts that children have regarding their actions. One teacher described how a student in their class thought poor behaviour was okay providing that they apologised afterwards.

Secondly, the panel agreed that lessons and/or a programme dedicated to building relationships would be very helpful for their school. Recommendations for topics included “*how to set healthy boundaries with people*”, “*having the confidence to form good and better relationships with people who treat you right*”, and “*conflict resolution skills*”. Teachers also mentioned how lessons within this programme could stress the importance of safe online relationships when engaging with social media or playing games online.



| Discussion

In the context of poor childhood wellbeing and school funding cuts, Verbal developed and delivered two school-based interventions in primary schools across NI. The first intervention, Building Resilience, improved mental wellbeing and resilience in nearly half of children and led to significant improvements in children feeling emotionally supported by others. The second intervention, Managing Difficult Emotions, led to improvements in 47% of children in recognising and managing their emotions. The largest improvements were observed for children being able to self-soothe when upset, and the youngest children significantly improved their perseverance when faced with challenges in school.

Children enjoyed taking part in the programme. Stories were often the most popular element of the programmes, with half of children feeling happier after listening to stories. When asked what they learned from the programme, children learned lessons such as being kind to yourself and to others, understanding more about their emotions, and the importance of not discriminating against others. Over 70% of children in Phase Two felt that stories helped them to feel thankful for what they have and to care for others in their class.

Feedback from teachers indicated that sessions led to a good depth of conversation, with children frequently identifying the key theme of the session.

Teachers were pleased with the level of discussion surrounding stories and could even hear children talking about the stories during play time. Discussion sessions were impactful as they helped quiet students to speak up and share their voice, and allowed children to have open conversations about topics such as divorce and losing pets. Multiple teachers reported how sessions would provide opportunities for extended learning in their classroom. For example, stories were used by teachers to help reinforce school values, and stories could lead to so much discussion that teachers would plan follow-up lessons to allow for further discussion and additional learning.

These findings in tandem indicate that our programmes were effective in their aims of promoting positive wellbeing, building resilience, and helping children to understand and manage their emotions. The success of this programme is important in the current context of poor childhood wellbeing in NI and the funding cuts to wellbeing programmes and services in primary schools (Bunting et al., 2020; Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). Our Advisory Panel reported how students were already displaying symptoms of anxiety at a young age, yet our programmes can be used to improve wellbeing and teach emotional regulation skills in young children.

We found that almost a third of children in Phase Two could better understand the emotions of others. Having open conversations about emotions and mental health can help children to understand the perspectives and feelings of others. This was found in a previous Shared Reading programme delivered by Verbal: children would have conversations empathising with their parents who were struggling during the cost of living crisis (Verbal, 2023). It is beneficial to improve empathy skills at a young age as children who can understand the emotions of others are not only able to make more friends, but perform better in school (Jones et al., 2011). This indicates that our programmes can have additional benefits to children such as helping them to socialise with others and improve their school performance.

Our Managing Difficult Emotions programme improved the mental wellbeing of young children, taught emotional regulation and self-soothing skills, and significantly improved perseverance in the youngest children. These findings are important as early years interventions are described as “critical” in promoting good wellbeing and provide the highest impact levels across research (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). While Shared Reading is a common early years intervention, these interventions are primarily conducted at home and with the aim of promoting literacy (Grolig, 2020; Leech et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2005). These findings demonstrate that Shared Reading is an enjoyable and effective intervention for improving young children’s mental wellbeing that can be delivered in schools.

Academics across the UK recommend taking a whole-school approach towards teaching about and improving mental wellbeing in schools (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). Our programmes were designed to be delivered by teachers in a classroom environment, supported by psychologically-informed questions to guide discussion and subsequently supported by illustrations to maintain attention. Feedback from teachers suggests that the programme was effective at supporting this whole-school approach. Teachers reported that our programmes helped shy students to share their voice, helped to reinforce school values, and were used to plan additional lessons to discuss topics such as different family units. These findings illustrate how our programmes can be utilised by schools to promote wellbeing, to build further relationships with students, and to reinforce lessons and values.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that both our Building Resilience and Managing Difficult Emotions programmes are effective and enjoyable ways to improve mental health in children within schools and to provide them with sustainable skills for managing their emotions and wellbeing.

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Thank you

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