



VERBAL WELL BEING - A SCHOOLS BASED MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL BEING PROGRAMME REPORT

Exploring the benefits of storytelling-based
wellbeing and resilience programmes in primary
school children in Northern Ireland

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In response to high waiting lists for and poor access to child mental health services in the Western Trust of Northern Ireland, a programme aimed at improving mental wellbeing and resilience was delivered to 42 primary schools across County Derry and County Fermanagh.
- This programme was delivered to 562 children over 488 storytelling sessions delivered across 732 hours.
- Emotional problems significantly reduced in children, and mental wellbeing significantly increased for children in the most deprived areas. For example, increases in mental wellbeing were 66% higher for children in the most deprived area compared to the least deprived. These findings show that this programme is effective at improving mental health, with greater benefits found for vulnerable and at-risk children.
- Resilience significantly improved for the younger children in Primary 7 classes. This indicates that the resilience component of the programme can help young children to manage and overcome challenges as they prepare to transition to secondary school.
- Conduct problems significantly decreased in girls and those in less deprived areas, suggesting that story-based interventions are helpful for reducing instances of poor behaviour in these groups.
- 77% of children enjoyed taking part in the programme, 83% felt listened to during story discussions, and 64% felt that taking part in the programme had improved their mood. 85% of those who took part would be willing to recommend the programme to others, leaving end-of-programme feedback such as "I wish you never left".
- Feedback from both children and facilitators showed that children loved the story sessions and enjoyed taking part in discussions. Sessions could: improve children's listening skills; encourage them to share their opinions; teach them about mental health and coping strategies; provide a safe space for conversations on topics such as loss and change; and encouraged children with Special Education Needs and non-verbal children to share their thoughts and use their voice.

INTRODUCTION

Background information

One in eight young people in Northern Ireland exhibit symptoms of depression or anxiety, a finding that is 25% higher than other regions of the United Kingdom (Bunting et al., 2020). Poor emotional wellbeing in young people is exacerbated by factors such as Adverse Childhood Experiences and living in economically deprived circumstances (Bunting et al., 2020; Divin, 2020). The mental healthcare system has experienced significant delays to care as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, nearly 1,800 young people in Northern Ireland were on a waiting list to receive care from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Madden, 2021). While this waiting list was largest in the Western Trust which includes Derry~Londonderry and Strabane, this news encouraged parents from rural counties such as County Fermanagh to voice their concerns over a lack of access to child mental health services (Curran, 2021).

In response to high rates of poor wellbeing and sizable waiting lists, the first theme of the Northern Ireland Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 is *promoting mental wellbeing, resilience, and good mental health across society* (Department of Health, 2021). Resilience refers to the ability to use available internal and external resources to manage and overcome difficult challenges (Pooley & Cohen, 2010). This refers to both equipping 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). Resilience is important to foster in young people as while Adverse Childhood Experiences can harm mental wellbeing, it should be acknowledged that maturing comes with implicit adversities such as transitioning from primary to secondary school and having to make new friends. This means that resilience programmes and interventions should be delivered to all children in preparation for managing and overcoming life difficulties.

The aim of this project is to foster resilience and improve wellbeing in the County Derry and County Fermanagh areas in the context of high waiting list for child mental health services, poor access to services in rural regions, and preparing for experiences such as transitioning to secondary school.

METHODS

Programmes

A 12-session intervention designed to improve mental wellbeing and resilience was delivered to Primary 7 classes across County Derry and County Fermanagh. This intervention was designed to instill and encourage the following tenets of emotional wellbeing and resilience in young people:

Emotional Awareness	Self-Esteem	Compassion
Self-Care	Problem Solving	Learning from Mistakes
Empathy	Thinking Straight	Happiness and Wellbeing
Self-Image	A Hopeful Outlook	Gratitude

Participants

Across Phases 1 and 2, children were recruited from 42 primary schools:

County Fermanagh	County Derry
St Mary's Primary School, Newtownbutler Irvinestown Primary School Tempo Primary School St Mary's Tempo St Martin's Garrison St Patrick's Primary School St Paul's Irvinestown St Ronan's Primary School Jones Memorial Primary School St Columban's Primary School St Ninnidh's Primary School Enniskillen Model Holy Trinity Primary School Lisbellaw Primary School Enniskillen Integrated Ballinamallard Primary School	St Eugene's Primary School St Patrick's Primary School St John's Primary School Sacred Heart Primary School St Brigid's Primary School Steelstown Primary School Strabane Controlled Primary School Fountain Primary School Holy Child Primary School Long Tower Primary School Bunscoil Colmcille Gaelscoil Ui Dhochartaigh St Catherine's Primary School Greenhaw Primary School St Ethne's Primary School Good Shephard Primary School Lisnagelvin Primary School Nailscoil & Gaelscoil Eadain Chapel Road Primary School St Anne's Primary School Londonderry Model St Paul's Primary, Slievemore Ebrington Primary School Oakgrove Primary School St Therese Primary School Rosemount Primary School

In Phase 1 of delivery, one half of a class was randomly selected to participate from each primary school, while full class lists were used for Phase 2 of delivery.

Materials

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. These measures are:

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, Ostergaard, Sondergaard, & Bech, 2015).

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.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

The SDQ is a 25-item measure designed to explore a range of strengths and difficulties in young people under the age of 18 (Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998). The difficulties assessed by the SDQ encompass emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity problems, and peer problems. These items can then be summed to create a total difficulties score for the young person, with higher scores indicating greater difficulties. A prosocial behaviour subscale is also included in the measure, with higher scores indicating more prosocial behaviour.

Attachment Style Classification Questionnaire (ASCQ)

The ASCQ is a 15-item measure to explore familial and friendship attachment styles in young people (Finzi, Har-Even, Weizman, Tyano, & Shnit, 1996). Five questions are dedicated to measuring each of the three primary attachment styles: secure, anxious, and avoidant. For the purposes of this study, only the five items related to secure attachment were selected to measure young peoples' security of relationships. High scores indicate more secure attachments to others, while low scores suggest insecure attachment.

Procedure

This programme took place between January and December 2022 across two separate academic years (2021-2022 and 2022-2023). Parental consent forms were sent out to parents which contained information about the programme and were collected prior to the beginning of the programme. A trained facilitator visited schools to explain the purpose of the programme and what children would be doing. After this explanation, children completed the pre-intervention questionnaire.

Each session, children would be read a story by the facilitator pertaining to themes of wellbeing and resilience. Stories were selected by Verbal's Literature Team and structured breaks were implemented for discussions. The Psychology team developed questions for these breaks that would encourage discussion and reflection on the theme. The programme was delivered in 12 sessions by facilitators, typically on a weekly basis where possible. Children completed the post-intervention questionnaire at the end of the programme. End-of-programme feedback reports were completed anonymously by children, and facilitators provided weekly feedback via an online form on the success of the session they had delivered.

Analysis Strategy

Quantitative data will be entered, cleaned and statistically analysed by the Verbal Psychology team using SPSS version 28.

Descriptive statistics such as age, gender, and the area-level deprivation of the child's school (via the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure) will be explored. Prior to data analysis, the normality of data will be checked via skewness and kurtosis scores to ensure a normal distribution. Data will be considered as normally distributed if skewness scores remain between -2 and +2 and kurtosis scores remain between -7 and +7 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010; Byrne, 2010).

The reliability of psychological measures (WHO-5; CYRM-R; SDQ; ASCQ) will be assessed using Cronbach's Alpha analyses. Following guidance from Taber (2016), measures will be deemed to have acceptable reliability if their alpha score is above 0.45.

Providing that data are normally distributed, t-tests will be used to explore if scores on psychological measures significantly changed before and after taking part in the intervention. t-tests will also be used to identify any gender differences in the psychological measures in pre and post-intervention questionnaires, while an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be used to explore age differences due to featuring more than two age groups. Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVAs) will then be used to explore whether changes in scores pre and post-intervention significantly differ by age, gender and deprivation. The Bonferroni correction will be applied to ANCOVAs to minimise the likelihood of identifying false positives during data analysis. Any data that are not found to be normally distributed will be analysed using non-parametric linear regression rather than ANOVAs and ANCOVAs. Findings will be considered as statistically significant if $p < .05$.

Frequency statistics such as percentages will be presented for both child and facilitator feedback. Thematic analysis will then be conducted on child and facilitator feedback to identify themes that emerged from their feedback.

Participant Overview

The intervention was delivered in completion to 42 primary schools between the period of January to December 2022. This intervention reached a total of 562 participants, encompassing 488 storytelling sessions delivered across 732 hours.

Participant data could only be included and analysed if the child had: a signed parental consent form; a completed pre-intervention questionnaire; and a completed post-intervention questionnaire. Following this check, completed data were included and analysed from 436 children.

Data Checking

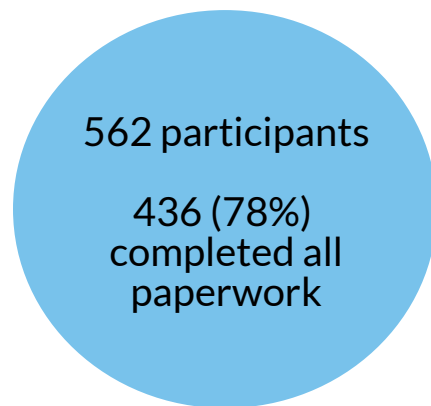
Prior to data analysis, the normality of data were checked by examining skewness and kurtosis scores. All data apart from the total resilience scores from the post-intervention questionnaires were normally distributed, ensuring that ANOVAs and ANCOVAs could be conducted for these variables. Any analyses involving differences in total resilience scores were conducted using regression rather than ANOVAs/ANCOVAs.

The reliability of the psychological measures used was explored using Cronbach's alpha. Alpha scores in the study remained above 0.45, meaning that all measures in the study were reliable measures of wellbeing.

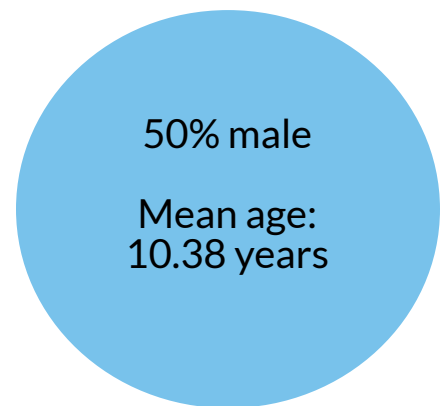
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

AT A GLANCE...

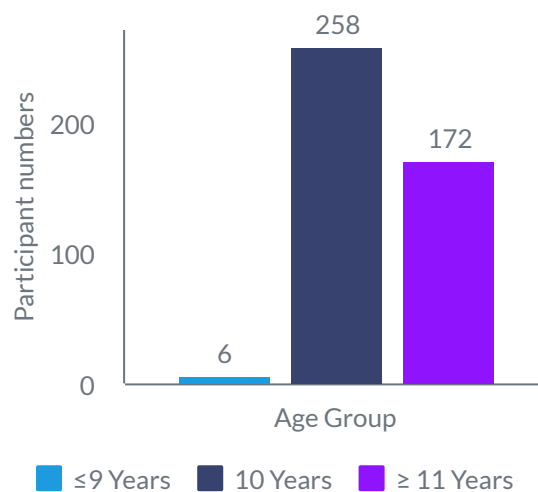
Sample size



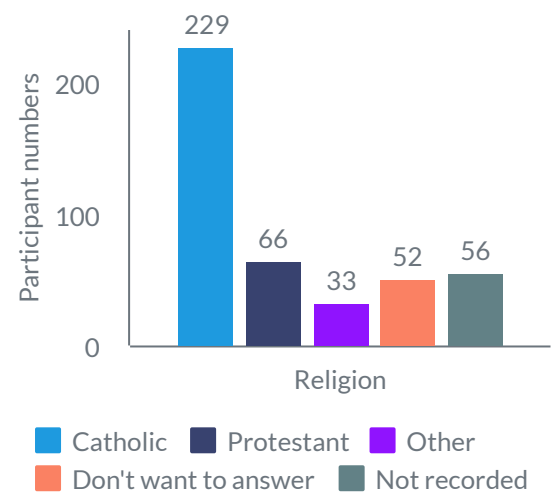
Sample characteristics



Age Distribution



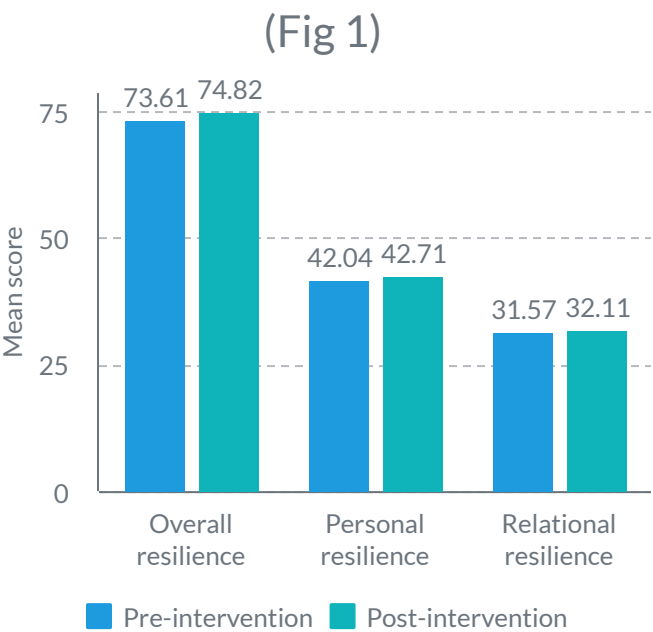
Religious Identity



59% of participants were 10 years old at the time of the intervention. Most children were white (91%), but the sample contained a range of ethnicities including Irish Traveller (n=6), Black Caribbean (n=1), Black African (n=2), Indian (n=4), Chinese (n=2), Pakistani (n=1), Mixed Ethnic Group (n=3) and Other (n=19). 53% of children identified as Catholic, but almost 25% of children did not want to answer or did not record an answer for religion.

RESULTS: RESILIENCE

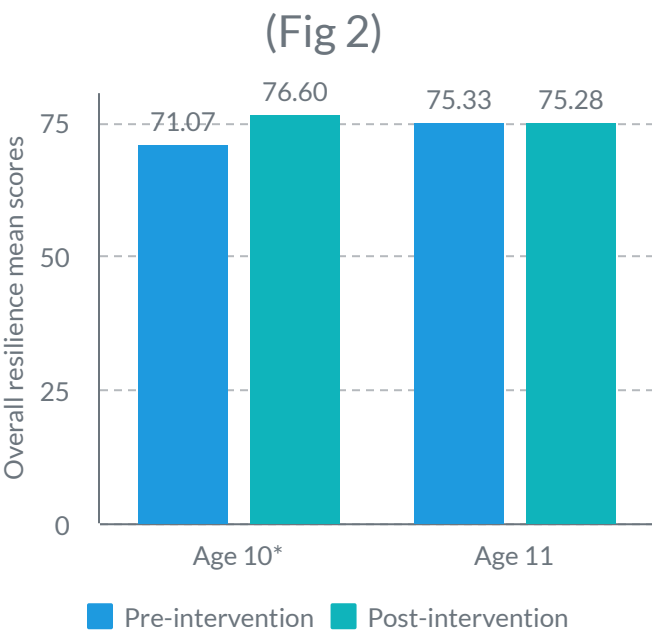
Comparing Pre and Post Scores



t-tests assessed whether resilience scores had significantly changed following the intervention. While small increases were found for all types of resilience in the overall sample after taking part, none of these increases were statistically significant.

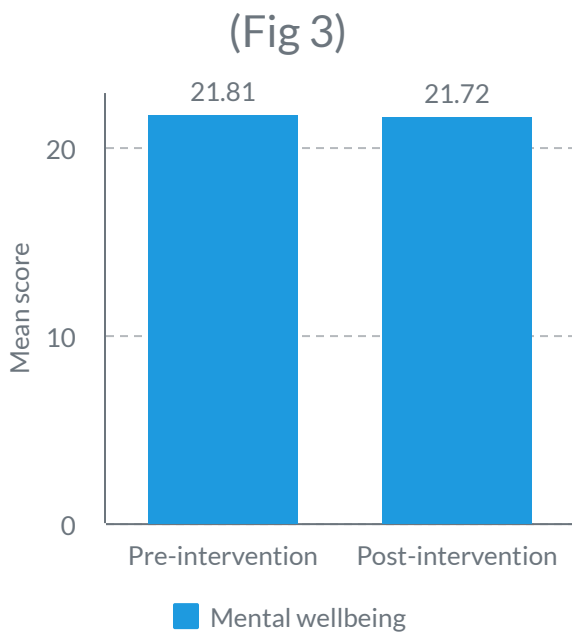
Exploring Age, Gender and Deprivation Differences

Analyses explored whether resilience scores before and after the intervention differed by age, gender or deprivation. Scores did not significantly differ by gender or deprivation for any type of resilience. However, age differences were found for overall resilience ($F=5.39, p=.003$), personal resilience ($F=6.83, p<.001$), and relational resilience ($F=3.18, p=.032$). The direction of these results, as demonstrated by Figure 2, indicated that children who were younger when receiving the intervention saw an increase in resilience, while resilience scores remained stable for older children. These findings were the same for personal resilience ($M=40.27$ to $M=43.80$ for 10 year olds; $M=43.15$ to $M=43.05$ for 11 year olds) and relational resilience ($M=30.80$ to $M=32.80$ for 10 year olds, $M=32.16$ to $M=32.26$ for 11 year olds).



RESULTS: WELLBEING

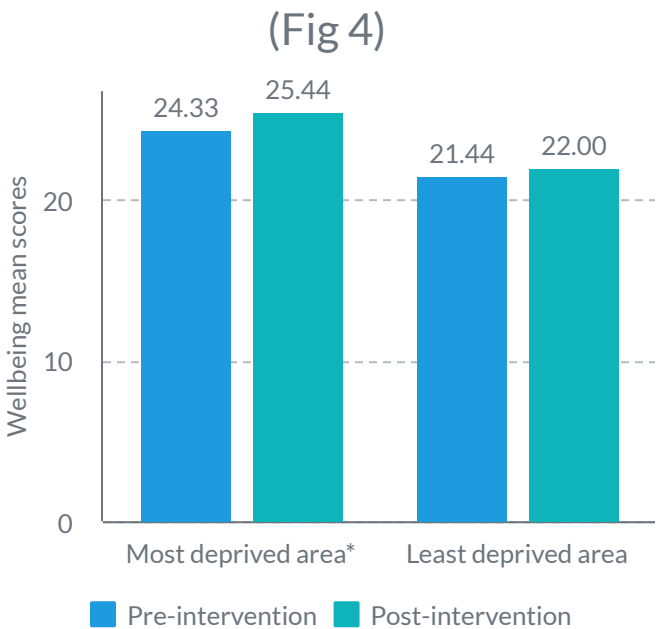
Comparing Pre and Post Scores



t-tests assessed whether wellbeing scores had significantly changed following the intervention. The results showed that wellbeing remained relatively stable across time (Figure 3).

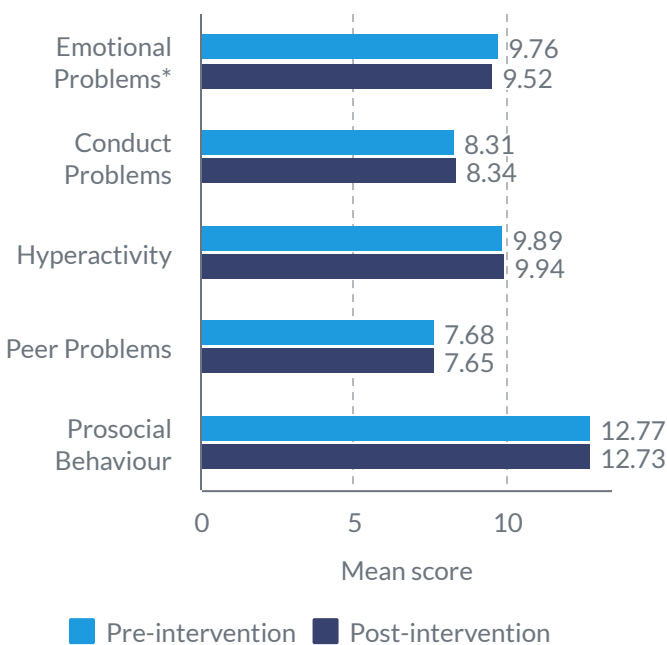
Exploring Age, Gender and Deprivation Differences

Analyses explored whether age, gender or deprivation differences were apparent between the pre and post-intervention assessments. No significant differences were found for age and gender, but deprivation differences were found ($F=2.03, p=.002$). The direction of results indicated that wellbeing saw greater improvements in more deprived areas. A comparison of this can be seen in Figure 4: the increase in mean after the intervention was 66% higher in the most deprived area ($M=24.33$ to $M=25.44$) compared to the least deprived area ($M=21.44$ to $M=22.00$).



RESULTS: STRENGTHS AND DIFFICULTIES

Comparing Pre and Post Scores
(Fig 5)

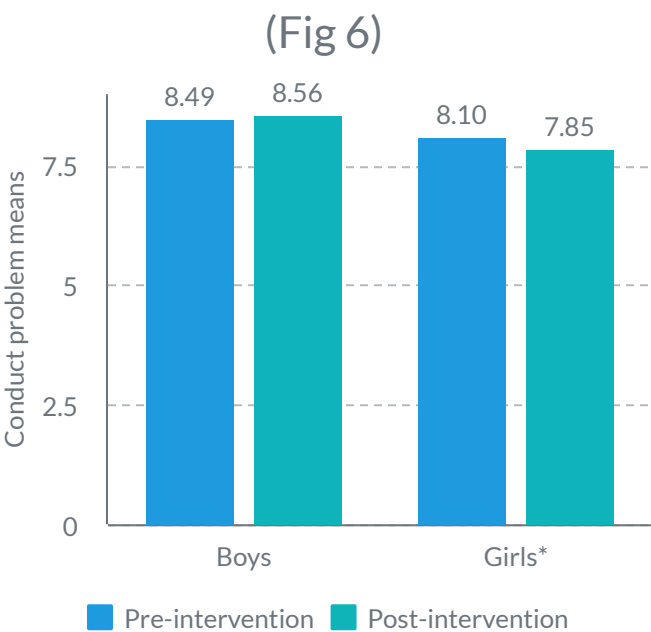


t-tests assessed whether strengths and difficulties scores had significantly changed following the intervention (Figure 5). It was found that emotional problems significantly decreased following the intervention ($t=2.15, p=.016$), while other scores remained relatively stable.

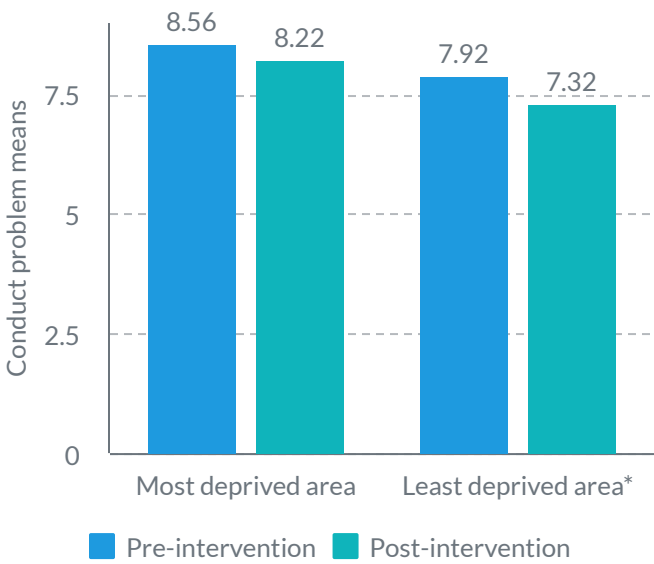
Exploring Age, Gender and Deprivation Differences

Analyses explored whether age, gender or deprivation differences were apparent between the pre and post-intervention assessments. Two significant differences were identified from these analyses.

The first significant relationship identified was a significant relationship between gender and conduct problems ($F=5.62, p=.018$). As shown in Figure 6, conduct problems remained relatively stable across the programme for boys, but saw a significant decrease for girls.



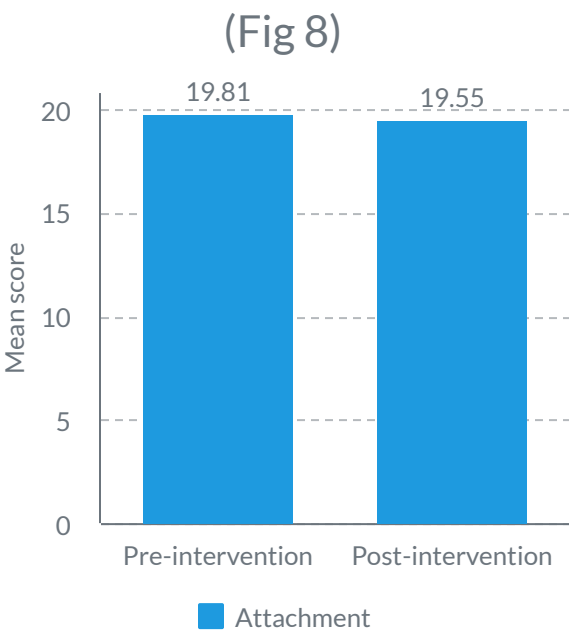
(Fig 7)



The second significant relationship found was a relationship between conduct problems and deprivation ($F=2.16, p=.004$). The direction of the relationship suggests that children attending schools in areas with lower deprivation saw higher reductions in conduct problems than areas with higher deprivation, as demonstrated in Figure 7.

RESULTS: ATTACHMENT

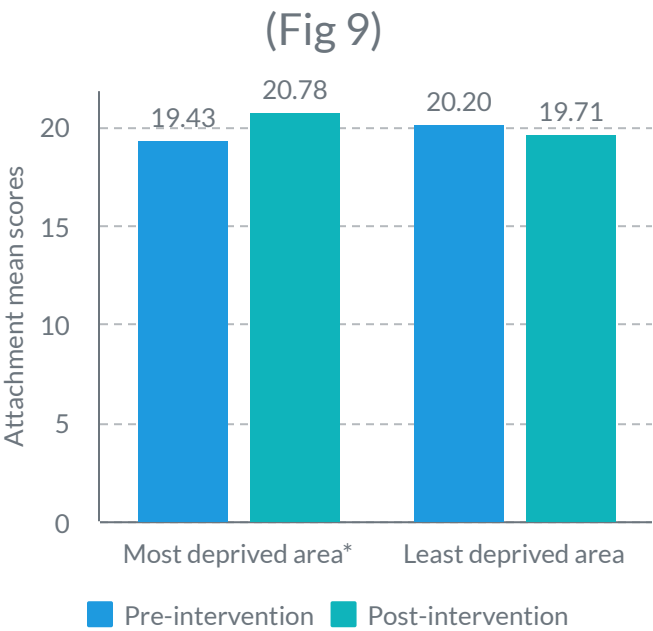
Comparing Pre and Post Scores



t-tests assessed whether secure attachment scores had significantly changed following the intervention. The results showed that attachment remained relatively similar across time (Figure 8).

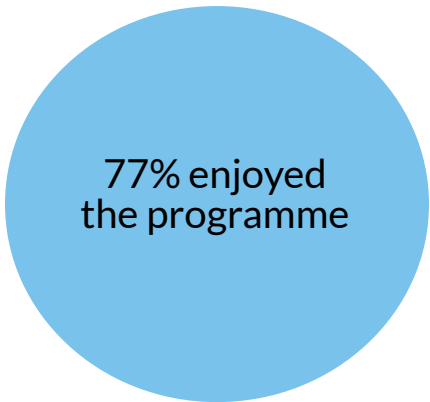
Exploring Age, Gender and Deprivation Differences

Analyses explored whether age, gender or deprivation differences were apparent in the pre or post-intervention assessments. No significant differences were identified in scores for age or gender. However, deprivation differences were found ($F=2.04, p=.007$). The direction of the findings suggests that higher improvements in attachment were seen in more deprived areas. An example of this can be seen in Figure 9 as attachment increased in the most deprived area ($M=19.43$ to $M=20.78$).



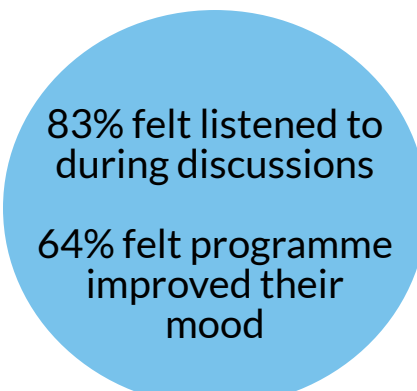
RESULTS: CHILD FEEDBACK

At the end of the programme, feedback was gathered anonymously from children to understand how they enjoyed and engaged with the programme.



Feedback was positive as 77% of children reported enjoying taking part in the programme.



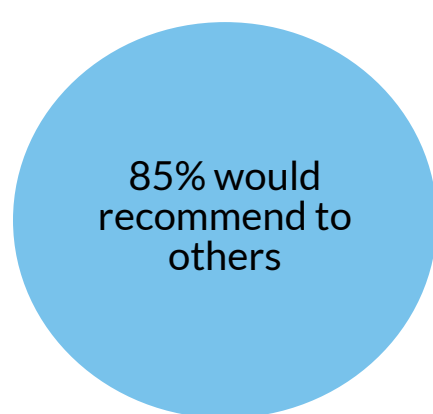


83% felt listened to during discussions

64% felt programme improved their mood

The programme could help foster positive mood and connectedness in those taking part. 51% of children reported feeling better about themselves and their life after sessions, and 47% felt that other children in their classroom became more positive afterwards. When listening to stories, 49% of children felt connected to the stories and the characters within. When discussions about the stories were taking part, 83% of children felt that their voice was being heard. Children felt that the programme had a positive impact as 64% reported that it improved their mood.

The programme left a positive impression on children at 85% would recommend it to others. When children were asked if they had any other comments about the programme, feedback received was positive. Examples include:



85% would recommend to others

"This is a great way to help people and opens up creativity"

"The stories were really good and I think you should come back again"

"This was an amazing programme, I hope others think the same"

"It was so nice, our class always looked forward to [facilitator] coming."

"I am going to miss the reading rooms and also THANK YOU"

"I wish you never left :("

RESULTS: FACILITATOR FEEDBACK

Facilitators completed a weekly feedback questionnaire pertaining to the content and success of sessions, such as how successful a story was at conveying its theme.

Average story success:
8/10

Average student
engagement: 4/5

Average depth of
conversation: 4/5

The average story success for each child across every session was 8/10. Facilitators then rated their perceptions of student engagement and depth of conversation for every session. The average level of student engagement and average depth of conversation worked out as 4/5 for both.

Word Cloud: Children

Children “enjoyed” “listening” to “different”, “fun” and “interesting” “stories” and “liked” “answering” “questions” and “hearing” the “opinions” of their classmates. Aspects of the “stories” that children found “enjoyable” include “confidence” in “characters”, “funny” moments in the “stories”, finding “listening” to the stories to be “relaxing”, “and hearing stories from “different” “countries” such as stories from an “American” setting. In the discussion sections, children “liked” the opportunity to share their “opinions” and liked “learning” and “talking” about “feelings” and “emotions” such as “anger”. Children also left positive feedback for their “facilitator”, saying things like they were a “kind” “person” and enjoying the “voice” they would use to tell “stories” in. Some children left feedback saying they enjoyed “everything” about the programme.



Word Cloud: Facilitators

Facilitators provided qualitative feedback at the end of every session via the question "Any other feedback? We would love to hear any other comments you had about the selected story and the theme, what worked well and anything you felt could be improved on".

Facilitators often reported “high” levels of “engagement”, “interest” and “discussion” in their “session”. Weekly feedback would share how the group “loved” the “story” and “engaged” with its “themes” with “lots” of “great” “discussion” where they would share what they “think”, with the “full” “class” getting involved at times. Some facilitators commented on how they thought their “class” was “emotionally” intelligent. “Children” were “keen” to learn about mental health topics such as “CBT” (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) and discussed topics such as “parents”, feeling “sad” and seeking “help”, both in the context of their own experience and through the characters in the “story”.



QUALITATIVE RESULTS: CHILDREN

06

Thematic analysis was conducted on children's feedback gathered from the end-of-programme questionnaire, resulting in the emergence of multiple themes and subthemes related to the programme:

Themes	Subthemes
The Stories	Story enjoyment Story variety Story relatability Story themes
Discussions	Sharing opinions Listening to opinions
Mental Health	Mental health benefits Learning about and discussing emotions Learning about coping strategies

Theme 1: The Stories

Subtheme 1: Story Enjoyment

As seen in Figure 10, children’s main reason for enjoying the programme was the stories that were read to them. Children praised the quality of the stories, using terms such as ‘interesting’, ‘fantastic’ and ‘amazing’:

"The stories were interesting"
"I enjoyed the fantastic stories"
"I think the stories were amazing"

One reason why children enjoyed the stories was the ability to use their imagination and imagine different characters, settings and countries:

"It let you use your imagination"

Children also seemed to enjoy the format of taking breaks during the story to discuss what was happening in the plot. This led to a sense of “suspense” during sessions and led to “surprises” as the story unfolded:

"I enjoyed the mysteries and the suspense"
"I enjoyed listening to the story the most with all the surprises"
"We didn't know what was going to happen"

Some children enjoyed characters within stories who were able to exude confidence:

"The confidence in the characters"
"Confidence"

One child described how they liked stories where you could learn more about a character and their own point of view:

"[I liked] the type of stories that are about a person's point of view"

Subtheme 2: Story Variety

Children enjoyed the range of stories that were read to them during the 12-session programme:

"The interesting amount of varieties of stories"

"The different type of stories there were"

"I loved all the different mixture of stories"

They enjoyed hearing stories that they hadn't come across in school or within their own reading, particularly for stories that take place in or originate in different countries:

"Hearing stories that I wouldn't normally hear"

"I like how the stories are in different countries"

Subtheme 3: Story Relatability

There seemed to be a relatable aspect to stories that children found particularly helpful to listen to:

"I got to listen to helpful stories"

Children were particularly able to relate to stories that were relevant to their real life situations, such as stories that could directly relate to their transition from primary to secondary school:

"[I like that] they relate to real life situations"

"How most of the stories were related to real life"

Subtheme 4: Story Themes

When discussing the story, children would often identify the story's key themes. Children liked this aspect of the programme and liked that the story being read to them had a specific "meaning":

"I liked that each story had a different meaning"

"I liked the meanings"

"[I liked] the meaning behind the stories"

As well as identifying the themes of a story, children liked the fact that there was something to learn from the story that they could apply to their own lives:

"It was a lesson in a story"

"That there was like different lessons in a story"

One child liked how all of the stories were linked to the broader themes of mental wellbeing, resilience, and preparing them for the school transition:

"I liked that all the stories were all linked in a way"

Theme 2: Discussions

Subtheme 1: Sharing Opinions

For several students, their favourite aspect of the programme was the opportunity to voice their opinions about the story and engage in classroom discussions:

"I enjoyed the way you got to listen to the story then answer out"

"When there is [sic] stops and you talk about the story"

"I enjoyed talking and communicating"

"Getting to give your opinion"

Facilitators would foster an environment where all voices were welcome and children did not feel obligated to answer in a particular way. This helped students to relax and share their opinions in the classroom without feeling that they were "wrong":

"I liked that we could have a little laugh and could join in"

"[I liked] that there are no wrong answers"

This aspect of the programme helped children to feel listened to during discussions:

"[My favourite part was that] I felt listened to"

Subtheme 2: Listening to Opinions

While students appreciated the opportunity to voice what they thought about a story, some students' favourite aspect was the ability to listen to the views of their classmates and introduce their own theories about the story:

"I enjoyed people's opinions"

"Other people's opinions"

"I enjoyed hearing everyone adding little things onto the story"

These classroom discussions helped a child to feel that they had become a better listener:

"I learned how to listen better"

Theme 3: Mental Health

Subtheme 1: Mental Health Benefits

Some students reported that they felt mental health benefits from participating in the programme:

"It was good for your mental health"

An example of these benefits was how a child's mood could improve after listening to the stories:

"The stories cheered me up"

A popular sentiment children expressed in their feedback was how calm and relaxed they felt when they were able to sit back and listen to the story:

"You got to relax and listen to the story"

"I enjoyed relaxing"

"That it was calm and relaxed"

"Sitting and relaxing"

"Relaxing when she is reading the story"

"It makes you feel relaxed"

Subtheme 2: Learning About and Discussing Emotions

Discussions would encourage children to talk about the emotions of the characters and how they must be feeling. Children appreciated the ability to have honest conversations about emotions with their classmates:

"The discussions surrounding emotions"

"The way they talked about feelings"

These conversations helped children to learn more about their feelings and how they might look like in others:

"[It] taught me about feelings"

"Learning about feelings"

"Learning about different emotions and how to cope"

Subtheme 3: Learning About Coping Strategies

As well as learning about and discussing emotions, children appreciated being able to learn more about what to do when they are feeling these emotions:

"Learning about different emotions and how to cope"

"Learning on how to deal with things like anger and anxiety"

Children also appreciated learning about specific coping techniques that they could apply to their daily life such as breathing methods:

"I enjoyed the stories and answering the questions and our breathing methods"

QUALITATIVE RESULTS: FACILITATORS

Thematic analysis was conducted on feedback gathered from facilitator's weekly session feedback forms, resulting in the emergence of multiple themes and subthemes related to how they felt the programme ran:

Themes	Subthemes
Stories	Identifying and exploring themes Relating to characters and themes Promoting literacy Sparking imagination
Discussions	Fostering understanding Facilitating challenging conversations Children gaining confidence Teacher praise
Mental Health Benefits	Learning about mental health Encouraging reflection and reminiscence Encouraging SEN and non-verbal children

Theme 1: Stories

Subtheme 1: Identifying and Exploring Themes

A common theme identified in the weekly reports was how much children enjoyed the stories delivered to them:

- "They enjoyed the story"*
- "...the children loved this story"*
- "The kids loved this story - very engaged in listening and discussions"*
- "One student wanted to give it [a] score of 11 [out of 10]"*

Students particularly enjoyed working out the themes of a story, and students were able to quickly identify the session's theme in group discussions:

- "...picked up on theme early and explored [it] well"*
- "This group had a thorough understanding of key themes"*
- "Group caught onto theme very quickly"*
- "...great understanding of the themes and enjoyment of the story."*

Children became quicker and more comfortable with identifying and exploring themes as sessions progressed, eventually requiring minimal prompting from the facilitator:

- "They were able to identify the themes and the key aspects. They also are feeling comfortable with the process and there is engagement from all students."*
- "There was clearly a sound understanding of the main concepts and themes of the story from this group. Very little prompting was required here..."*

Children explored themes in a range of ways. For example, the theme of exclusion from the story Don't Judge Me was explored in an individualistic nature as they considered how it would have made them feel:

"...the class did bring a lot of the book's feelings back to themselves and how they would feel if excluded or not wanted"

However, children could use stories such as Smash Mouth Taffy as a vehicle to explore different options for characters and the morals of their actions:

"[Class] suggestions as to how he could have done things differently and achieved a more positive outcome."

"...so much group discussion especially regarding right and wrong of taking the recipe"

Subtheme 2: Relating to Characters and Themes

Multiple facilitators felt that children in their sessions were able to relate the experiences of the character and the themes of the story to themselves and others:

"[Children] could relate to her experiences"

"Good engagement, relating and identifying with [the] story"

"The class were very invested in the story and the characters and could really identify with the themes being discussed"

"Good depth to discussion, relating to self and others"

Examples of things that children could relate to involved having to help out at home and living with "annoying" brothers and sisters:

"The group were very keen to respond with examples of their own helping out"

"Lot[s] of interest in the character of Charlie and annoying sisters/brothers that are loved"

Children were also able to relate to more serious topics within stories such as The Beans and Rice Chronicles, such as the hurt caused by lashing out at others and how not listening can have serious consequences:

"They really enjoyed the story and were able to give personal examples of times that they over reacted out of anger or fear"

"The children offered some interesting, relatable comparisons of their own experiences of anger and how not listening can have negative consequences"

Subtheme 3: Promoting Literacy

As only sections of stories could be read to children in the timeframe, this led to lots of desire to hear how the story ended and for copies of the story to be available in the school library:

"...everyone had an opinion, including asking about the 'next chapter' in the story"

"They wanted to know how the story ends so perhaps it would be beneficial to provide a copy of the book to the school library so they can continue the story."

One child asked for more information about the author so that they could find their other work:

"One child...would like more details about the author"

When asking for story feedback, children reported wanting to personally buy the book so that they could read more:

"Two children want to buy the book"

Subtheme 4: Sparking Imagination

Facilitators reported being impressed with the imagination of the children. This included things like coming up with alternative scenarios, different endings, and theories regarding characters:

"There is so much imagination and willingness to participate in this group, and they were captivated by the story."

"[They suggested] wonderful scenarios of how the ending should be"

"A few of the boys suggested that the stepmother/witch were the same person, and that seemed to ignite a new interest."

The stories capturing the imagination of the children culminated in children wanting to draw their ideas during sessions, which the teacher and facilitator agreed to allow:

"One pupil and her friend asked if the class could draw 'their ideas' while they were listening to the story"

Theme 2: Discussions

Subtheme 1: Fostering Understanding

Facilitators often reported a high level of engagement in the group discussions during their sessions, which was supported by the psychology-guided annotations:

"Great engagement"

"...[a] very engaged group."

"This class group listened attentively and there was good concentration and engagement. The class were very emotionally aware and got what the story and annotated questions was guiding them to think about."

Children themselves seemed to enjoy listening to the opinions of others and benefited most from sessions where everyone was talking and getting involved:

"A lot of the children took part in the question and answer sessions."

"Every pupil responded at some point during the session"

"[A] couple of students said they enjoyed it when the whole class were getting involved."

Group discussions helped foster high levels of understanding in children. For example, children were able to discuss the financial pressures their parents were under and understood that it was not easy to provide them with the things that they asked for:

"They demonstrated a clear understanding of how expensive toys can be and how hard it is for parents to buy things for their children especially with 'everything' being so expensive"

Subtheme 2: Facilitating Challenging Conversations

Facilitators helped guide children through challenging conversations that emerged as a result of the story. A wide range of conversations happened throughout sessions, including fostering open conversations about the transition from primary to secondary school:

"...there was a good conversation about the changes that they face in September"

Group contemplation and conversation was also had for challenging topics such as parental separation and loss:

"...and the theme was very fitting for some of the pupils (parents separating), she said that it was deep and made them think..."

"...[the] heavy topic [of loss]. Some children discussed some personal feelings..."

"There was a lot of deep conversation in the class on how they had lost people who were important to them. One student talked about losing her grandmother and how her family had got pieces of her clothing, they were all allowed to pick a piece of her clothing and talked about good memories of being with their grandmother."

A facilitator found during a discussion that children had awareness of topics such as depression and drug use:

"There were words and thoughts offered from this group such as depression, drugs, counselling which suggested with some children awareness of some very complex human issues"

Awareness of these issues could suggest that children would appreciate the opportunity to talk about challenging subjects in a safe and supervised environment.

Subtheme 3: Children Gaining Confidence

A facilitator noted within their first session that the most confident children talked the most at the beginning, but more children joined in as they became more comfortable:

"...initially the children who answered were the more confident ones, however as the story progressed more students asked questions"

Weekly feedback allowed us to see more facilitators reporting on children becoming confident enough to speak, eventually leading to full class participation:

"...[a] couple of new engagers [for this session]"

"...A couple [of students] engaged for first time this week"

"[There was a] couple more new responders"

"Great engagement, including 1st time engagers"

Facilitators also reported on how children who were shy and reserved gained the confidence to speak as the weeks progressed:

"A lot of children who are normally quiet seemed to feel at ease speaking more during this session"

"Some children are becoming more involved who have been more reserved to date"

"One more student engaged who's normally reserved, great in depth response from them regarding the theme."

"One student that is often quiet was much more interactive with the group."

Subtheme 4: Teacher Praise

Teachers who observed the sessions offered praise to facilitators. One piece of praise involved how discussion of the session's theme would certainly continue after the facilitator left:

"The teacher also engaged and said that it was a great session and that she felt that there would be much discussion afterwards"

Teachers also praised how sessions and discussions were particularly helpful for the stress of navigating the transition from primary to secondary school:

"The teacher also said that the stories were very on point regarding the changes they face [regarding transitioning to a new school]"

Theme 3: Mental Health Benefits

Subtheme 1: Learning About Mental Health

Sessions were helpful for teaching children about psychological concepts such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Children were able to grasp these concepts and appreciated when they were drawn on a board for them during the session:

"...[a] lovely story for introducing CBT fundamentals to this age group. The children picked this up readily"

"Again, we linked it back to the theme of last week and the circle of CBT. The children are really grasping the concept"

"This group loved the story and CBT concept. The children loved the CBT model written out on the board"

Stories and discussions helped children to understand the importance of taking care of your mental wellbeing. This included important lessons from stories such as The Beans and Rice Chronicles about why you shouldn't bottle up your emotions, how our emotions can influence our behaviour towards others, and how talking to others about your problems can help:

"The children also had a good understanding of how pent up emotions can cause distress and behaviour to change and that talking about problems can help."

"Conversation did also center on how Isaiah acted very negatively when he was upset because he kept all his feelings inside of him!"

"They also noticed how Isaiah's behaviour was very negative when he kept all his emotions inside."

A facilitator pointed out how students themselves were eager to direct the conversation towards mental health, sharing their emotions and discussing coping strategies:

"...students themselves steered discussion to more in depth exploration of dealing with emotions and coping mechanisms"

Subtheme 2: Encouraging Reflection and Reminiscence

Stories could encourage children to reflect on themselves and to share their memories with the classroom. One discussion during the story of Don't Judge Me devolved into positive self-talk among the students:

"...even explored examples of what everyone is good at and get compliments on"

Candid and honest conversations were had about topics such as dealing with change and Transfer Test stress. Discussing and reflecting on their emotions was described as a positive experience for the children:

"Transfer tests had been completed at the weekend so the change of school and dealing with anxiety, [and] being able to understand and process emotions has been very positive for them all."

Children used the discussion to share personal matters such as their own experiences with losing a loved one. Feedback from both the session facilitator and the teacher indicated that this was not upsetting for the child, rather they appreciated the opportunity to talk about it openly:

"One young boy talked about treasure from when his father was alive. His teacher assures he is well supported and he wasn't upset, but happy to have the chance to talk about him."

Subtheme 3: Encouraging SEN and Non-Verbal Children

As the weeks progressed, facilitators saw more eager participation from children with additional needs:

"The class engaged well and there were 3 boys in the class who usually do not engage and would have additional needs, but they were engaged and seemed to really enjoy the interaction and one of them answered a question"

Conversations about emotions seemed to resonate particularly well with children with Special Education Needs:

"Great discussion about feeling mixed emotions, and relief that there was a resolution at the end. Kept the attention of even the children [with Special Education Needs]."

Sessions could even encourage children who are typically non-verbal to speak and and share their opinions with others:

"...on a very positive note the girl that seemed non verbal communicated through her friend and participated in nearly all sections...her input was great"

Summary of Findings

Quantitative Findings

- A programme designed to improve wellbeing and resilience was delivered to a total of 562 children over 488 sessions totalling 732 hours. Data were analysed from 436 children (50% male, mean age 10.38 years) who completed all paperwork.
- Mental wellbeing significantly improved in the project for those from more deprived areas. For example, the increase in wellbeing was 66% higher in the most deprived area compared to the least deprived area.
- Resilience significantly improved for the younger children in the class.
- Emotional problems significantly reduced after taking part, and behavioural problems significantly reduced for girls and for those from less deprived areas.
- Feelings of closeness to others significantly improved for children living in more deprived areas.
- 77% of children enjoying the programme. Children often felt listened to during these discussions and felt that the programme had improved their mood. 85% of children would recommend it to others. These findings are supported by volunteer feedback on very good scores for story success, student engagement and depth of conversation.

Qualitative Findings

- The stories told to children were very popular and often their favourite aspect of the programme. Children enjoyed the variety of stories across different countries and cultures that sparked their imagination,. Children could relate to characters that experienced similar dilemmas to them, and they liked being able to identify the theme of the session and learn a lesson from it.
- Facilitator feedback echoed children's love of the stories. Children were quick to identify the themes of a lesson and used stories as a vehicle to explore moral choices and what they would do in the protagonist's situation. Children had open discussions about their emotions and behaviour, even sharing examples of when they were remorseful for their actions. The programme helped to promote literacy to children as they asked for more details about books and their authors.

- Discussions were another popular part of the programme as children liked being able to share their opinions about the story and the theme, leading to children saying that they felt listened to. Conversely, children liked the opportunity to listen to others and hear the perspectives of their classmates, with feedback saying that they felt the programme had improved their listening abilities.
- The enjoyment of group discussions was once again echoed in facilitator feedback. Conversations showed high levels of understanding in children, including topics such as empathising with their parents. Facilitators helped support and guide children through challenging conversations such as loss and their upcoming school transition. The programme helped children to open up more during discussions and was praised by teachers for sparking lots of conversation even after sessions.
- Children felt that the programme had mental health benefits. Stories could cheer children up and relax them while listening. Children appreciated being able to have open conversations about emotions with their classmates and taught them more about their feelings. Stories and discussions would help children to learn what coping strategies to use when feeling certain emotions.
- According to facilitators, children enjoyed learning about psychological concepts such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and grasped the concept quickly. Discussions helped children to fondly remember loved ones that they had lost, and helped children with Special Education Needs and non-verbal children to contribute to class discussions.

Discussion of findings

Verbal's programme designed to improve mental wellbeing and resilience in children was found to significantly improve mental wellbeing and resilience, particularly for children at risk of a poor school transition such as younger students and those living in deprived areas. We found that improvements in mental wellbeing and attachment to others were higher for children in deprived areas, with increases in mental wellbeing that were 66% higher for children in the most deprived area. Resilience significantly improved for the younger children in the Primary 7 cohort, particularly for personal resilience which relates to their sense of self and their own abilities. We also found significant decreases in emotional problems across all groups. These findings suggest that Verbal's programmes are most effective at improving mental health and resilience in vulnerable children who are most at risk and most in need of help.

The mental health benefits of this programme are particularly important in the context of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the current status of mental health care in Northern Ireland. Regions such as County Derry and County Fermanagh have large waiting lists for and poor access to child mental health services. Children living in deprived circumstances have an increased risk of ACEs (Bunting et al., 2020; Divin, 2020), yet they may struggle to access adequate mental health care in these regions. The findings of this study show that Verbal's programmes can bridge the gap between mental health services by delivering services within schools that can significantly improve the mental health and wellbeing of at-risk children.

The increased benefits to children in deprived areas are also important in the context of the current Cost of Living crisis. Sessions allowed children to have candid conversations where they empathised with their parents about the increasing cost of “everything”. These conversations can help foster empathy and understanding in others, as evidenced by increases in attachment and closeness to others after taking part in the programme. Feeling connected to and able to rely on others is particularly important for children experiencing the transition to secondary school as they may need to make new friends or seek comfort from others if they are experiencing problems.

We found that conduct problems significantly reduced in girls and from students in less deprived areas. It is possible that this programme helped improve the behaviour of children exhibiting problems due to the stress of school transition and fears for the future. This would align with previous research showing that boys have more persistent conduct problems and that children from higher-deprivation areas have an increased medication need to assist with conduct problems (Gagnon et al., 1995; Nunn, Kritsotakis, Harpin, & Parker, 2020).

The massive popularity of stories supports the idea of continuing to use bibliotherapy-based interventions in this age group. Feeling listened to and heard during discussions is an important finding as these discussions can help empower young people to speak up and share their opinions. This is important as feelings of self-doubt can appear in this age group and the young person may have few opportunities to speak up at this age (e.g. feeling afraid to answer the wrong thing in class). This is echoed in feedback from children who felt listened to and liked how there were “no wrong answers” when speaking.

An additional benefit of using bibliotherapy-based interventions is the ability to make mental health resources accessible to young people. Children appreciated being able to learn psychological concepts such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and found conversations about emotions and their relevant coping strategies to be helpful. Facilitators reported how shy and nervous children would eventually open up to them and begin participating, and the programme helped children with Special Education Needs and non-verbal children to speak and share their opinions. This emphasises Verbal’s commitment to every story mattering and empowering people to use their voice.

Conclusion

- Mental wellbeing and feelings of closeness to others saw higher improvements in more deprived areas, indicating that Verbal's intervention is particularly helpful for vulnerable and at-risk children for managing their emotions and helping them to connect with others.
- Resilience significantly improved in younger children, showing that children can benefit from this intervention designed to prepare them for life challenges and overcoming adversity.
- Emotional problems significantly decreased in children, and behavioural problems significantly decreased in girls and those in less deprived areas, indicating that story-based interventions are helpful for managing difficult emotions and reducing instances of poor behaviour in these groups respectively.
- The programme was very popular with children as 85% would recommend it to others and left feedback requesting more sessions. Story sessions helped children to feel heard and improved their mood after taking part. These findings support the importance of using bibliotherapy-based interventions in children for improving their resilience, wellbeing, and fostering connections with others.
- Feedback from children and facilitators showed that the programme was effective in allowing children to have open conversations in a safe environment and could promote literacy, improve listening abilities, teach children more about mental health and various coping strategies, and encourage children to use their voice, with benefits seen for both children with Special Education Needs and non-verbal children. This feedback further emphasises the power of bibliotherapy-based interventions in encouraging vulnerable people to use their voice and learn more about their mental health.

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Thank you