



Community Foundation RTE Toy Show Appeal 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

The Gaining Resilience and Optimising Wellbeing (GROW) programme was developed to address growing concerns about young children's emotional wellbeing in Northern Ireland, where rates of anxiety and depression are significantly higher than the UK average (Bunting et al., 2020). Delivered across eight primary schools, GROW aimed to strengthen protective emotional skills in children aged 4–7 through structured, story-based emotional learning. Using Verbal's Creative Guided Reading model, the programme combined original wellbeing-themed stories with psychologically informed discussion prompts to promote emotional regulation, empathy, and resilience in a classroom setting.

Findings from this post-programme evaluation indicate that GROW had a significant and measurable impact on children's mental health and social-emotional development. Quantitative analysis revealed statistically significant improvements in wellbeing scores ($t(162) = 2.23$, $p = .027$), with 43% of children reporting increased emotional wellbeing. Additionally, 69% of children improved in their ability to manage emotions, with specific gains in self-regulation, empathy, and self-awareness. Resilience scores also improved for 44% of participants, suggesting increased capacity to recover from setbacks and regulate distress.

Qualitative feedback supported these findings. Children described feeling calmer, more confident, and more aware of their emotions. They reported learning to be kind to themselves and others, to believe in themselves, and to seek help when worried. Teachers observed that children became more confident discussing emotions and saw improved participation, even among children with additional needs. The storytelling approach helped create safe, engaging spaces for reflection and emotional development.

The programme's design using literature and discussion as a therapeutic medium aligns with broader research on affective bibliotherapy (Shechtman & Nir-Shfir, 2008; Heath et al., 2005) and early SEL interventions (Durlak et al., 2011). GROW's classroom-based delivery model ensures the approach is inclusive, accessible, and sustainable within educational settings. It supports early prevention goals outlined in national mental health strategies by embedding wellbeing education into everyday learning.

In conclusion, GROW demonstrates that structured, story-based wellbeing programmes can play a vital role in developing emotional literacy and resilience in early childhood. It offers a scalable, evidence-informed model for improving children's mental health outcomes and equipping them with tools to thrive both socially and emotionally.

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). The GROW programme was developed to support the emotional wellbeing of children aged 4-7 years old, with a focus on building the emotional foundations necessary for long-term mental health, resilience, and positive relationships. It is widely recognised that the early years are critical for emotional development, and interventions during this period can have a lasting impact on a child's ability to regulate emotions, develop empathy, and navigate social challenge (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Public Health England, 2021).

The programme aimed to build protective emotional skills through the power of storytelling, helping children to recognise and manage emotions, develop confidence, and strengthen relationships with peers and trusted adults. Evidence shows that young children are increasingly exposed to stressors that can negatively affect their emotional wellbeing, particularly in areas experiencing higher levels of disadvantage (Anand, 2024; Donnelly & Brown, 2022). National strategies (e.g. the Children and Young People's Strategy 2020–2030) highlight the need to build emotional resilience early to buffer against adversity and support long-term mental health.

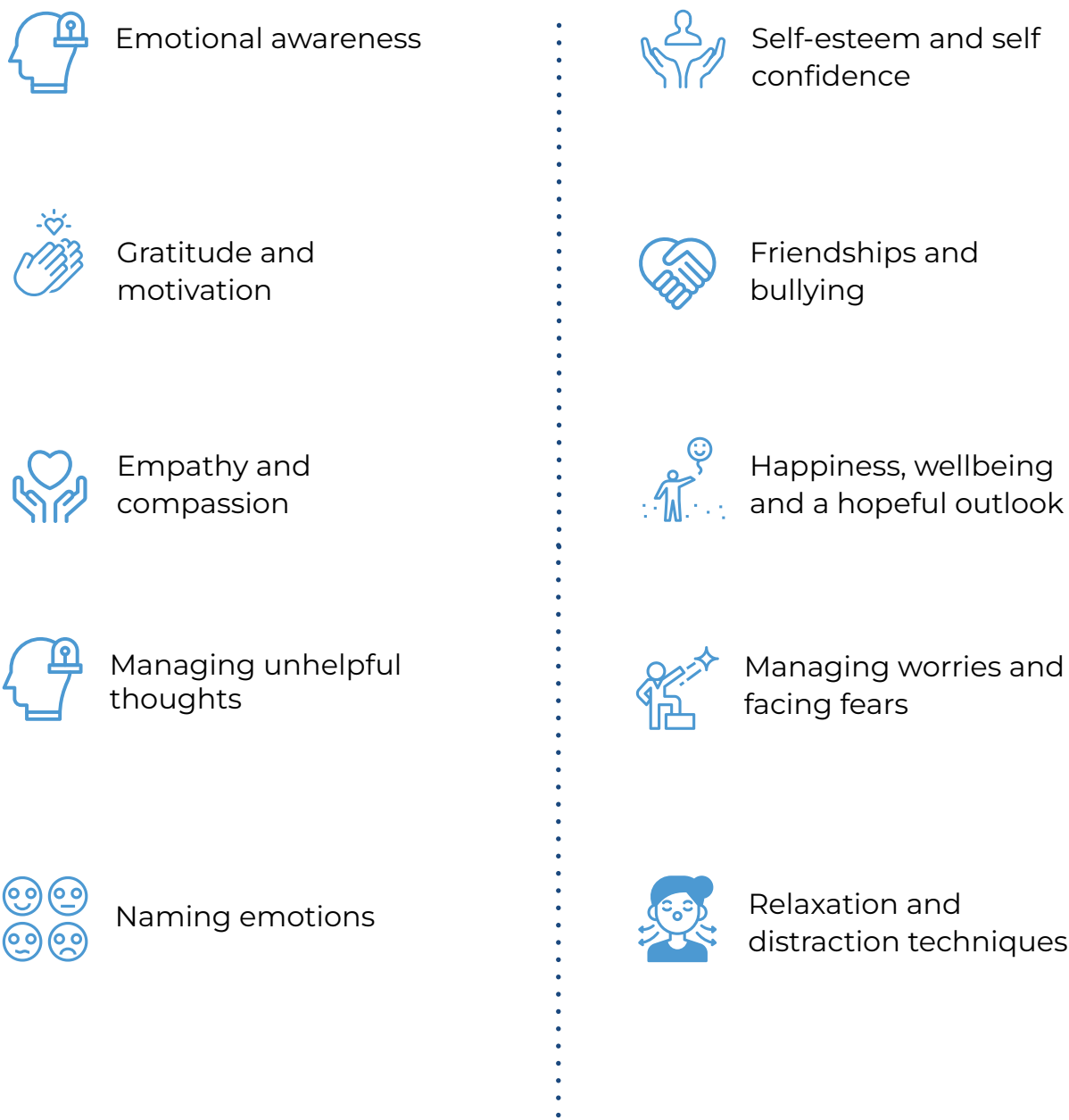
Creative bibliotherapy is the guided use of stories and discussion to support wellbeing has emerged as a promising intervention to address these challenges. A growing body of research demonstrates the positive impact of bibliotherapy on children's self-esteem, empathy, and emotional regulation (Serafini, 2024; Heath et al., 2019; Tillott et al., 2022). Stories provide safe and engaging spaces for children to explore big emotions, reflect on experiences, and build vocabulary for expressing themselves. When facilitated by trusted adults, storytelling becomes not only educational but also therapeutic, promoting resilience and reinforcing the message that children are not alone in how they feel.

This report outlines the outcomes of the GROW programme, drawing on both quantitative data and qualitative feedback to explore the programme's impact. The results are considered in light of the wider research literature, demonstrating how targeted story-based interventions can support the emotional wellbeing of young children in school settings.

Methods

Programmes

Verbal’s collaboration with Community Foundation NI RTE Toy Show Appeal took place over three cohort and involved the development and delivery of three six-week creative guided reading programmes for children aged 4-7 years old. Primary 1, 2 and 3 would each be delivered a carefully curated emotional wellbeing programme that has been designed to build resilience and give children a deeper understanding on how to choose positive coping strategies to help regulate their emotions for the future. The curricula aimed to instil the following aspects of resilience and emotional wellbeing.



Participating Schools

Eight schools within the Derry/Londonderry and Strabane areas took part in the GROW programme. These are the schools:

- Oakgrove Primary school
- Our Lady of Fatima Primary School
- St John's Primary School
- Artigarvan Primary School
- St Patricks Primary School
- Eglinton Primary School
- Strabane Primary School
- St Eugenies Primary School Strabane

Creative Guided Reading Model

Verbal develops targeted wellbeing interventions using its Creative Guided 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 out loud combined with targeted discussion guides to encourage reflection and conversations. Creative Guided 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 inclusive environment (Detrixhe, 2010).

The GROW programme applied Verbal's Creative Guided Reading Model for children aged 4-7 years old and used the power of storytelling and psychology to gain a deeper understanding of their own emotional wellbeing, build resilience and learn strategies to help regulate their emotions in the future. Using a model of creative guided reading, stories are read to the children and discussion breaks are taken where psychologically informed questions prompt reflection around different themes.

Programme Development

When designing a Creative Guided Reading programme, a curriculum document of specified mental health themes is created by Verbal's Psychology Team. Stories and/or poetry are then written or selected by Verbal's literature team to align with the mental health themes outlined in the curriculum. In Verbal's Creative Guided Reading model, discussions are guided by psychologically informed discussion guides 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.

Once the programme is created, sessions are delivered by a trained Facilitator in a specific location, typically weekly. A session will commonly consist of the story being read aloud in three parts, with each part divided by discussion breaks guided by the psychologically informed discussion guides.

Programme Assessment

A mixed methods approach was used to gather data from the children depending on their age. The programme was delivered to children in Primary one aged 4-5 years, Primary 2 aged 5-6 years and Primary 3 aged 6-7 years. Children in Primary one and two were given end of programme feedback sheets which included drawing their favourite story and colouring in a face as to how they felt after hearing the stories. The options for the emotions was happy, calm, sad, worried and angry, the facilitator would also ask the group what they have learned from the programme based on the learning objectives of the programme.

These questions were: To tell others when I am worried, to believe in myself, to be kind to myself, to care for other people in my class, what to do when I feel overwhelmed and how my thoughts can affect how I feel and act. Also, general programme feedback was gathered as to whether the children enjoyed the stories, enjoy the stories being read to them, whether they would like the programme again and what was their favourite part of story time.

The measures and methods used to collect data were:



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.



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. These measures also apply to resilience traits to understand whether children's ability to bounce back in difficult situations has increased pre and post intervention.



End-of-Programme Activity Sheet

As gathering feedback from young children can be challenging, we designed an interactive activity sheet for the end of the programme for children in Primary 1 and 2, to learn more about how they found the programme. Children were encouraged to: draw and/or describe their favourite story from the programme and colour in the emotions they felt while listening to stories.



End-of-Programme Questionnaire

At the end of the programme, the classes 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.

Procedure

The programme was delivered in schools between November 2024 and June 2025. 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 beginning of the first session.

Each session, children would be read a story relating to themes of wellbeing and emotional literacy. Stories were written by Verbal's Literature Team and structured breaks were implemented for discussions and for showing illustrations related to the story events. The Psychology team developed questions for these breaks that would encourage discussion and reflection on the theme. The programme was delivered by facilitators, 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.

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.

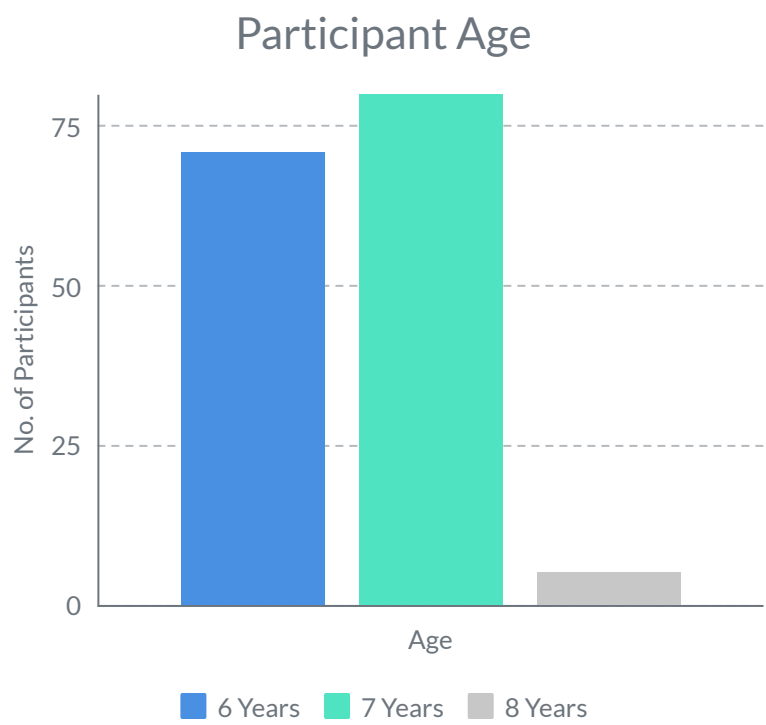
Statistical significance was explored when analysing data. Statistical significance refers to the probability that a finding happened due to a specific cause, most likely the result of the programme. In alignment with established guidelines, results were considered as statistically significant if $p < .05$. This means that we can be at least 95% sure that a finding was not due to chance of coincidence.



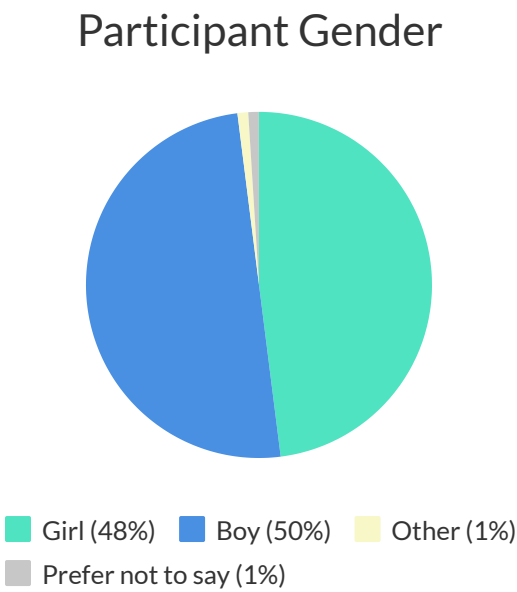
Results: Participant Overview

Participant Information

This project was delivered in eight schools between November 2024- June 2025. The programme reached a total of 752 students across the three year groups. A parent consent form, a pre-programme questionnaire, and a post-programme questionnaire were available for 163 Primary 3 students.



Children in this programme who completed surveys were between the ages 6-8, with 44% aged 6 years and 53% aged 7 years old.



Slightly more boys (50%) than girls (48%) took part in the programme.

Results: Wellbeing

Programme Results:

There was a **statistically significant improvement** in total wellbeing scores from pre- to post-intervention, $t(162) = 2.23, p = .027$, indicating a positive shift in participants' self-reported mental health and wellbeing following the programme.

↑43%

Improved their emotional wellbeing

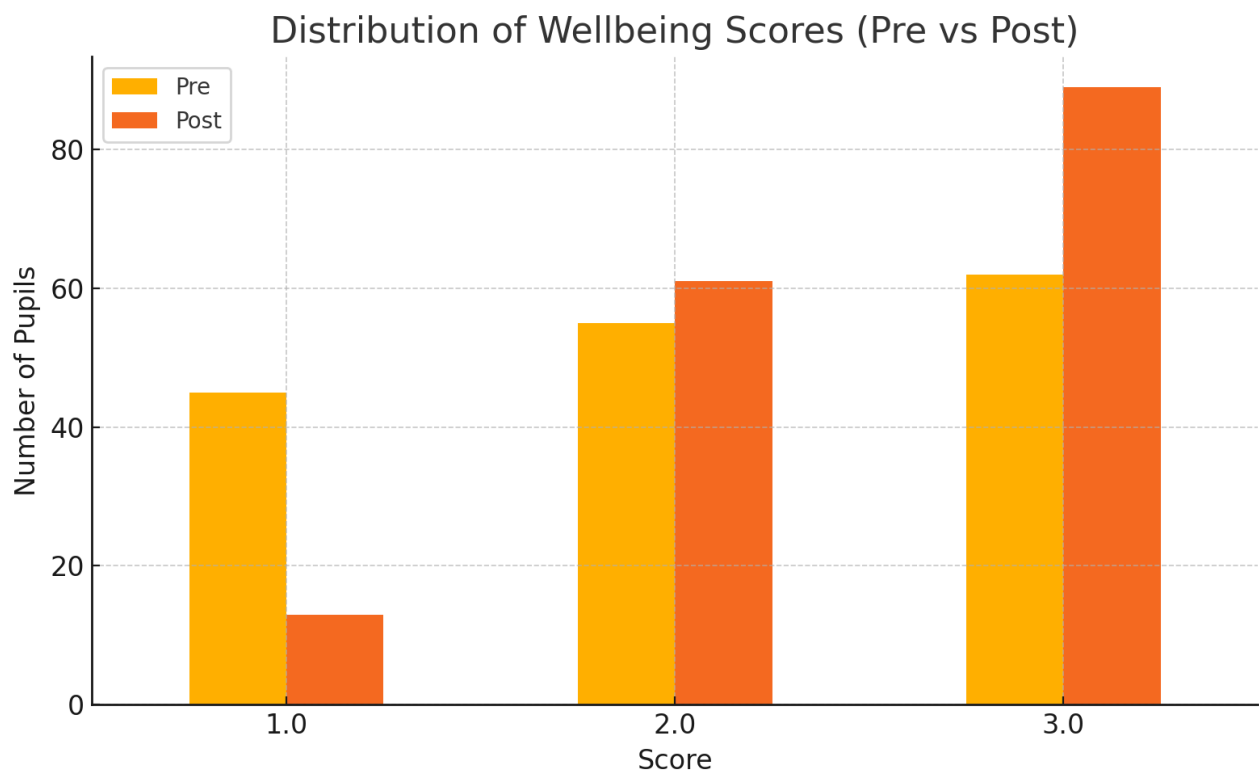
↑42%

Have been feeling relaxed

↑35%

Have been in a good mood

The distribution of wellbeing scores shows a marked shift from low to high wellbeing following the programme. This pattern, alongside the statistically significant improvement in mean scores, highlights a meaningful positive impact on emotional wellbeing.



Results: Resilience

Programme Results

↑ **44%**

Became more resilient

The project aimed to improve emotional wellbeing and resilience in children. We found that by the end of the programme, resilience **improved in 44% of children.**

The programme led to notable improvements in children's self-reported resilience. Specifically, the percentage of children who selected "Very like me" increased. These responses suggest a shift in children's perseverance and emotional regulation following the intervention, indicating that more children felt capable of persisting through challenges and recovering from emotional distress by the end of the programme.

👍 **69%**

I carry on trying even if I find something hard

👍 **64%**

I calm down quickly after I have got upset.



Results: Managing Emotions

Programme Results

↑ **69%**

Improved in
managing emotions

Overall, 69% of children demonstrated a significant improvement in their ability to manage emotions, as measured by the combined NFER-Nelson subscale scores from pre- to post-survey.

To better understand the emotional development of participants, the survey was designed to measure four key subscales aligned with **emotional literacy**: Empathy, Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Motivation. These domains reflect core components of emotional competence and resilience. Each subscale was assessed using targeted questions that explored specific emotional and behavioural responses. For example, **Empathy** questions examined the ability to recognise and respond to others' emotions, while **Self-Awareness** focused on understanding your own strengths, emotions, and vulnerabilities. **Self-Regulation** explored the ability to manage emotional reactions, especially in challenging situations, and **Motivation** measured perseverance and effort in the face of difficulty.

↑ **22%**

Increased in
empathy

↑ **23%**

Increased in their
self-awareness

↑ **25%**

Improved with their
motivation

↑ **32%**

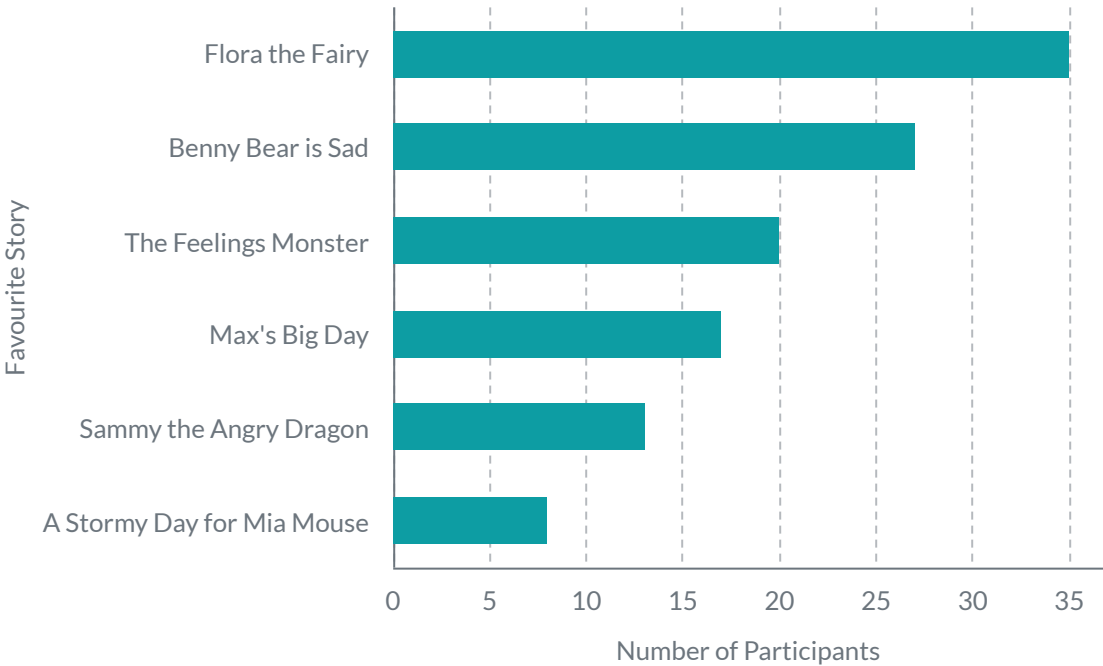
Improved their self-
regulation skills

Results: Child Feedback

Primary One: Activity Sheet

After the programme, child feedback was collected from an age-appropriate end-of-programme activity sheet: activity sheets were collected.

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

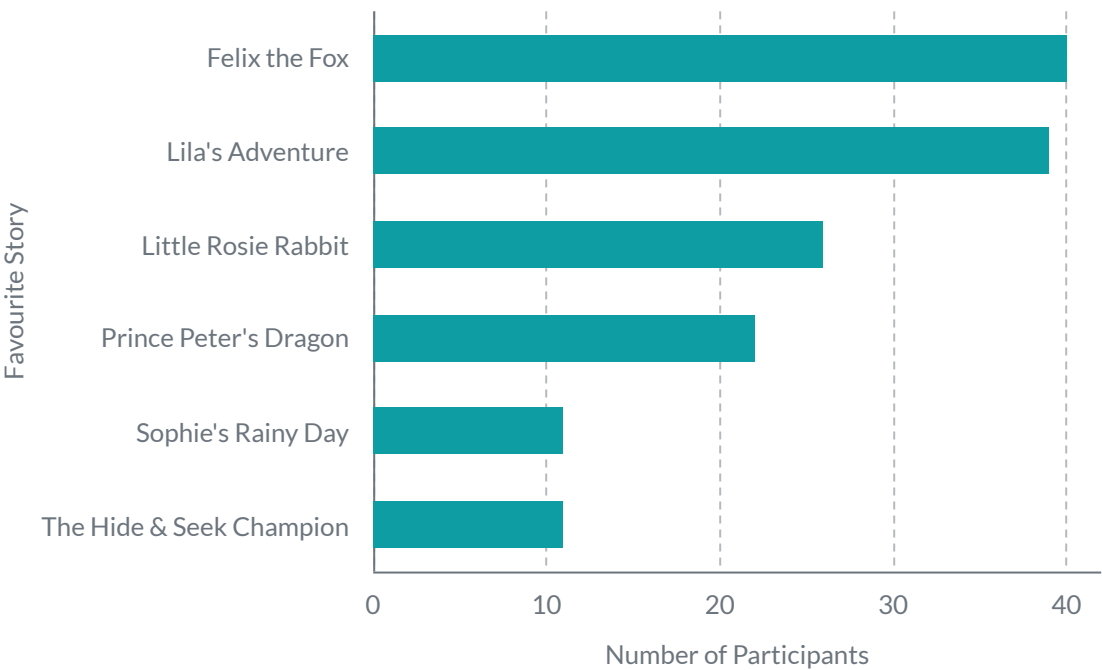


When asked about their favourite stories, P1 pupils showed a strong preference for Flora the Fairy, which was selected by 29% of the children. This was followed by Benny Bear is Sad (23%) and The Feelings Monster (17%), suggesting that stories focused on naming and exploring emotions resonated well with this age group. Max’s Big Day (14%) and Sammy the Angry Dragon (11%) also received positive engagement, while A Stormy Day for Mia Mouse was chosen less frequently (7%). These responses highlight that stories with relatable characters, emotional expression, and gentle problem-solving were particularly effective in engaging younger children and supporting emotional learning. This insight can inform future curriculum design by emphasising emotionally themed narratives with clear, age-appropriate emotional journeys and comforting resolutions.

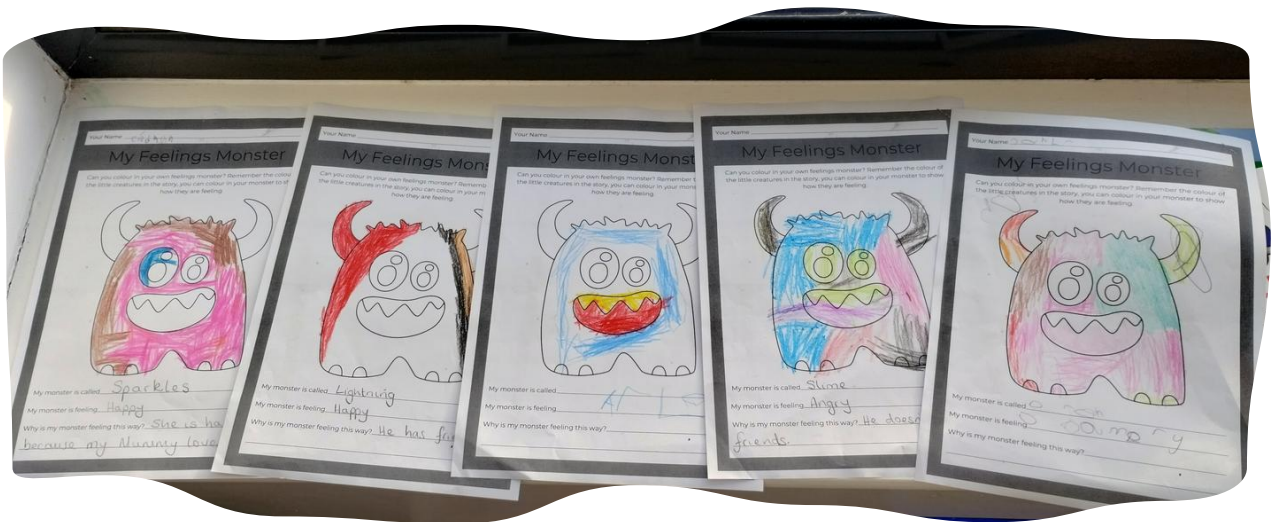
Primary Two: Activity Sheet

After the programme, child feedback was collected from an age-appropriate end-of-programme activity sheet: activity sheets were collected.

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



Among Primary 2 pupils, the most popular story was "Felix the Fox", selected by 27% of children, closely followed by "Lila's Adventure" at 26%. These two stories stood out for their engaging characters and emotional relevance. "Prince Peter's Dragon" was also well received, capturing 15% of the votes, while "Little Rosie Rabbit" appealed to 17% of pupils. Both "Sophie's Rainy Day" and "The Hide & Seek Champion" were selected by 7% of children each. These results suggest that stories exploring friendship, courage, and overcoming challenges resonated most strongly with this age group.



Qualitative Feedback: Pupils

Children demonstrated a strong capacity to reflect on emotional learning themes explored during the story sessions. Their written responses offer valuable insight into what they internalised from the programme and how they connected the stories to their own emotional and social development.

Talking about worries and Help-seeking

1

Children expressed an increased willingness to share their emotions and seek help when feeling overwhelmed or worried:

"Talk to someone when you are worried. Adults can help you."

"Tell someone so you can stop worrying."

Believing in yourself and Self-confidence

2

Many pupils articulated an improved sense of self-efficacy and encouragement to try, even when faced with challenges:

"Just try and you will surprise yourself - you can do it!"

"Try to believe in yourself. You can do it. Be brave."

Self-kindness and Compassion

3

Several children acknowledged the importance of being kind to themselves:

"You need to be gentle on yourself."

"Kindness is very important."

Caring for others and Social Skills

4

Children linked stories to peer relationships and prosocial behaviour:

"Make good choices. Be Kind"

"Take care of our friends. Kindness is easy to earn"

Qualitative Feedback: Pupils

5

Coping Strategies and Managing Worries

Children retained and repeated practical strategies for managing difficult emotions:

"Talk to someone, take a deep breath, go out in nature"

"Take a deep breath and count to 10."

6

Thoughts and Feelings

Pupils began to explore the connection between thoughts, emotions, and behaviour:

"If I feel sad or worried, I'll be sad and worried. Think happy thoughts."

7

Calm and Reflective Space

When asked what they valued most about story time, children emphasised the peaceful environment and emotional focus:

"A bit of peace and quiet and everyone being calm and listening."

"We get to think about our feelings."

"We get to hear new stories."



Qualitative Feedback: Facilitators and Teachers



"The programme is succeeding in getting the students to open up and giving them the language they need to be able to discuss and process their emotions in a healthy way."

This teacher observed a noticeable improvement in children's ability to express and understand their emotions. The stories and activities provided a safe structure for developing emotional vocabulary and confidence in talking about feelings which is a factor of building emotional self-awareness and regulation.

"One child with additional needs (Autism)... is engaging well with the stories, identifying themes and discussing them. This week, discussion was created across the classroom with many more children participating."

Initially intended to support one child, this moment reflects how the story sessions opened up wider classroom discussion. The teacher noted how a child with additional needs was not only engaged but contributing meaningfully helping set the tone for broader participation and shared learning across the class.



"The P3s in particular loved comparing each story to the previous one at the end and voting on which they liked the most. By the end, they could recall each story and what happened to all the characters."

This reflects how students were not only engaged in the storytelling sessions but were also developing memory, comparison, and reasoning skills. The enjoyment of ranking and revisiting stories demonstrates how narrative structure can enhance critical thinking and collective reflection.

"One child was very upset and unsure for the first couple of weeks. The teacher said the stories are helping her with her emotions to better cope and understand. In the last two weeks, she has participated in discussions and been able to let go of the class bunny (used when upset)."

This shows how repeated exposure to the content through stories can help children gradually build resilience. The shift from distress to active participation highlights the programme's role in fostering a sense of emotional safety and self-regulation.



| Discussion

The results of the GROW programme provide strong evidence that story-based emotional learning can significantly enhance the mental health and emotional wellbeing of young children. The primary outcome was a statistically significant improvement in overall wellbeing scores from pre- to post-programme demonstrates that GROW succeeded in achieving its central aim. Quantitative findings show measurable improvements across key domains of social and emotional learning (SEL), including self-regulation, empathy, self-awareness, and resilience. These outcomes align with existing evidence on the importance of early intervention in supporting children's emotional literacy and long-term mental health.

Children demonstrated statistically significant gains in their ability to identify and manage emotions. The Managing Emotions composite score revealed that 69% of children improved from pre- to post-intervention, suggesting that repeated exposure to emotion-themed stories alongside classroom discussion can be a powerful tool for emotional regulation. This is consistent with previous research which has shown that narrative-based SEL interventions can improve self-regulation skills, especially when delivered in familiar and supportive educational contexts (CASEL, 2023; Denham et al., 2012).

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 believing in yourself.

Improvements were also noted relating to empathy and self-awareness. These gains are particularly important given that emotional understanding and perspective-taking are foundational components of social adjustment and peer relationships in early childhood (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004). In GROW, these skills were cultivated not only through story content but also through facilitated discussion and emotional check-ins. Facilitator feedback highlights how children related narrative themes to their own lives and built emotional vocabulary over time. 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.

| Discussion

Moreover, resilience scores showed substantial improvement, with over half of the participants demonstrating positive change. This is especially encouraging given that resilience is a protective factor for later mental health and academic success (Masten, 2014). The inclusion of stories that explicitly tackled themes of frustration, perseverance, and emotional recovery appears to have offered children accessible models for navigating difficulty and bouncing back from setbacks.

Qualitative feedback from educators reinforces the quantitative findings. Teachers reported that children were more willing to talk about their emotions, could recall key narrative themes, and were increasingly confident in participating in classroom discussions. Notably, teachers observed growth even among children with additional learning needs, underlining the programme's inclusive and accessible design.

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.

This programme was designed to be delivered by facilitators in a classroom environment, supported by psychologically-informed questions to guide discussion. 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.

The findings from the GROW programme provide evidence that structured, story-based emotional learning can be both enjoyable and impactful for children aged 4–7. Embedding this kind of curriculum within early years settings may support wider goals around mental health prevention, emotional wellbeing, and readiness to learn.

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Thank you

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