



Understanding, Emotions and Books Beyond Words: A neuroscience perspective

Leading SEND & mental health consultants **Prof. Barry Carpenter OBE CBE**, **Jo Egerton** and **Stas Smagala** developed a study involving Books Beyond Words. This month is the first of a 2-part article looking at the study in detail.

MOST people know what it is to worry about life changes and the effect on their health, well-being and loved ones. Information that aids understanding and coping is an important means of support. However, there are few accessible books that address these issues for young people and adults with learning difficulties.

Text comprehension often presents a barrier to struggling readers' investigation and understanding of key issues they need to explore as adults. Wordless books provide an alternative, allowing the reader to 'leap over [text] decoding into the higher order thinking' (Locher, 2015). The narrative sequence

of illustrations provide 'memory pegs' allowing readers to connect with the pictures, understand the back-story and make associations with information, experiences and emotions in their own long-term memory.

In addition to supporting readers' health and therapeutic needs, Books Beyond Words book clubs can provide social opportunities for people with learning difficulties within their local community. People with learning difficulties often experience exclusion from the community. In the 2015 Sense survey, 77% of young disabled people and 53% of all disabled people reported feeling lonely, expressing a desire to

get out more (40%) and to have more opportunities to meet people (25%).

Aims of Books Beyond Words

Since Professor Sheila the Baroness Hollins founded Books Beyond Words in the 1980s in response to the needs of her son and his friends, the word-free books have enabled people with learning difficulties to express their fears, worries and why they are hurting inside, as well as to understand the feelings they experience as adults.

The award-winning Books Beyond Words (<http://booksbeyondwords.co.uk/>) tell stories about important or difficult events that challenge people

in their everyday lives. The body of the books contain no words, and the stories are semi-structured through pictures that clearly communicate key messages and ideas through facial expressions, body language and colours. The books are designed to be therapeutic as well as informational, and there is written guidance at the back of each book for facilitators. Using the pictures, readers can interpret and extend the story-lines to reflect and explore their own aspirations, concerns and experiences around the topic.

Executive Director Professor Sheila Hollins explains: "Enticing someone into the story and helping them to understand that they can read when they thought they couldn't read is quite an important part of what this whole process is. It's empowering the person, giving them information, access to feelings, access to things which they've often been protected from having access to. And enabling them to really let you know how much they want to know, how far they want to take the story, whether they want to personalise it, whether they want to say, 'That's like my experience,' 'That's what happened to my friend,' 'Is that going to happen to me?'"

People with communication and learning difficulties, often together with their friends, families, supporters and professionals, use Books Beyond Words books in many different ways. They may want to raise awareness about and prepare for life's challenges, to increase their understanding and reduce their anxiety about a forthcoming event, as a way to introduce and talk about difficult topics or to come together socially with their friends to relax, read and enjoy the stories. The books can also enable them to build a dialogue with health professionals and other people who support them.

Books Beyond Words have a range of titles that support this. They cover life areas such as: living a healthy and happy life; speaking out; sharing interests with others; coping when something goes wrong; understanding things that happen to me and those I love (including illness, abuse and death); sharing thoughts and feelings; and out and about in the community.

Wordless books are widely inclusive, being open to the story-changing voices of whoever is reading, including people



from a wide range of learning abilities, linguistic backgrounds and socio-economic experiences. Wendy Lukehart (2011), Youth Collections Coordinator for the District of Columbia Public Library, Washington, D.C., spoke of wordless books generally:

"Since there is no single or correct story, readers' task is to slow down and look carefully, applying everything they know about narrative to the process of 'reading' the pictures."

She listed the skills that people use - often unconsciously - in accessing and interpreting pictures; visual decoding, original thinking, language production, an understanding of multiple viewpoints, and the interpretation of meaning.

Why pictures without text?

When compared with listening to stories, reading text for understanding places a greater active processing burden and a larger set of cognitive demands on the brain (Bar-Kochva, 2013; Lysaker et al., 2011; Webster et al., 2013). 'Easy Read' books are often offered as a means of bridging understanding for young people who have difficulties decoding and understanding words. However, pairing the pictures with words (both visually interpreted) may set up attentional competition between the two sources of information and actually reduce the reader's ability to process meaning (Hurtado et al., 2014). Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003) report:

"When asked about the reading that he had just completed, Shaun

(pseudonym) put it this way: 'I don't know what happened, I was too busy reading the words.'"

In contrast, wordless books act as 'story frames' that allow readers to get past decoding (Locher, 2015) and stimulate the readers to tell the stories in their own words. The sequential pictures enable readers to process concepts and the structure of the plot (Cassady, 1998). They can activate readers' memories of similar past events and experiences, and enable them to use this knowledge to supplement the story (Webster et al., 2013).

Illustrations also provide readers with knowledge of situations that are outside their experience. Specific details in the pictures provide 'memory pegs' through which the reader can connect with the picture's back-story and form associations with information already in their long-term memory (Carpenter, 1999; Carpenter and Morris, 2001; Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson, 2003).

Bradley (Bradley and Hollins, 2013) also reflects on using Books Beyond Words: "I have also become aware how words are quite linear and impose an agenda whereas the picture allows the person to scan the whole before focusing on what is most important and meaningful to them."

Similar to reading text, following the creation of the story arising from the picture, it is important to allow a process of summarising, including reflection, information recall and review of the main points (Webster et al., 2013).