

# How can reading a book from an authentic author deepen a child's knowledge about Autism

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## What did you plan to do and why?

Our school was gifted £1000 to spend on library books this year. I was asked to compile a shopping list of books I felt would best fit our school. One of the areas I wanted to invest in was inclusive texts. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (2022) outlined the importance of having an authentic voice through inclusive text. Critical Literacy (2020) also supported my thinking as it said it was important to consider how the characters are portrayed, are they authentic or supporting stereotypes. My headteacher and I thought it would be good to use one of the books for this enquiry so there was evidence that the money spent was having an impact. In my class I have 11 pupils ranging from P5-7. Looking at the individuals in my class I felt that a book featuring a character with autism would help the children to learn about autism from an authentic voice. We settled on 'Can you see me' by Libby Scott. In this book Libby shares her experiences of being autistic and starting year 7 in an English school. To measure the impact the book had I investigated what the children what they knew about autism by getting them to fill in a questionnaire. At the end of the book the same questionnaire was given so I could compare what they knew before and after the story. 'Scottish Book Trust Resource: Keeping your library up to date' () outlined that having more exposure to diversity through books with authentic authors will encourage empathy and understanding. Given the link found by the OECD (2000) between reading and academic achievement across other curricular areas I was aiming to see if the children had a better understanding about living with autism after reading the book.

## What has happened in your enquiry?

I shared two choices of books for the children to choose between. Both books were written by someone with autism sharing their experiences of growing up with autism. Because I have a multicompsite class I chose to read the book allowed to include all the pupils in the enquiry. I then gave the children a questionnaire to access their knowledge of autism. The questions consisted of statements with options, YES, NO or Don't Know. I felt I confident I would be able to teach them something as most children answered 'Don't Know' to most of the questions asked. This would give me quantitative data to compare a before and after snap shot of their learning.

he books structure is unusual as it consists of a chapter of two which are largely fiction, followed by the authors own diary entry from when she was an 11 year old girl. I would read the chapters and the diary entry to the class then we would have a discuss what had happened in each chapters to unpick what this tells us about autism. I would also share knowledge about certain autistic traits as they became relevant. I noticed that the pupils in my class were becoming more confident in discussions about autism and would be able to identify, for example, when the characters senses where becoming over stimulated or the misunderstood something because of the way it was said. I also explored with the class the picture book 'Leo and the Octopus' by I. Marinov and C. Nixon. Within the first page some of the pupils had identified that Leo was autistic. Because of time I have not yet finished the book with the children. I gave them the questionnaire again after four weeks to see what they had learnt in that time.

## What impact has this enquiry had?

The children were asked 12 questions before the enquiry, then asked the same 12 questions after. For each question the trend was towards the children having more knowledge. Some of the questions had not been covered in the book or I felt were less relevant but here are some results I felt were worth sharing.

When the children originally given the statement

1. I know what autism is 4 said 'Yes' and 7 said 'Don't Know'

This went to 11 'Yes' – so 100% on the second questionnaire. Although not unexpected it shows the confidence the children felt about their understanding that none of them felt they did not know anymore.

Another interesting finding was the misconception that more boys have autism than girls. When initially given the statement

2. More boys have autism than girls. 3 said 'False' and 8 'Don't Know'.

This went to 11 'False' on the second Questionnaire. Again, 100%. This shows that having an authentic voice, from a female living with autism can be used to challenge common misconceptions.

One area the book explored was the authors lack of understanding of social situations and the children really picked up on this. When asked

5. Autistic people do not easily understand what other people are thinking. 5 'True', 1 'False' and 5 'Don't Knows' in the original questionnaire moved to 9 'True', 1 'False' and 1 'Don't Know' showing that generally the children had more understanding of the difficulties someone with autism may experience in social situations.

An additional area of focus for the class while reading was the characters strong sensory feelings. Before reading the book the children were given the statement

12. People with autism can have strong sensory feelings. Initially, 2 'Yes', 1 'False' and 8 'Don't Know' compared to 10 'Yes' and 1 'Don't Know' highlighting the knowledge the children gained from reading the book about the lived experiences of someone with autism.

Another interesting result was when faced with the statement

8. People with Autism prefer to be alone originally 2 'False' and 9 'Don't Know' went to 9 'False' and 2 'Don't know'. Learning from Tally's thoughts and experiences the children learnt that not all people with autism prefer to be alone and are able to challenge this generalization.

Lastly when faced with the statement

7. People with autism have bellow average intelligence. initially there were 5 'False' and 6 'Don't Know' this then went to 11 'False'. 100% of the children identifying this statement is false.

Overall I would argue after analyzing the results that reading this book has taught the children more about autism then they knew before the story. Overall the trend has been to wards accurate knowledge over not knowing. While also correcting any incorrect knowledge in some areas.

## What are the implications and next steps?

One concern I have is that the main character becomes the 'Stereotype' for the class on what autism is. Leading to misconceptions amongst the class. For example 100% of the children correctly identified that 'People with autism have bellow average intelligence.' is a false statement. However, many people with autism do have bellow average intelligence so I need to be careful that this one example does not lead to the assumption that all people with autism are the same. To counter balance this I will recommend to the children other books the school purchased featuring characters with autism so they can can develop their understanding.

I still have not completed the book so I intend to continue reading the book to the class. I will do another questionnaire to see if they have some more knowledge at the end, of some of the other areas not yet covered in the book but might be covered in other chapter.

The before and after questionnaires are extremely limiting. They are specific questions than give specific bits of quantitative information. To gain more qualitative information about the children's learning I would like them to create a poster about the main character. This will offered the opportunity for the children to share their learning in a way that is personal to them. There will bit pieces of information that were more relevant to some children so it would be good to see what each children perception is. There may also be details that I have not picked up on so did not ask about that the children picked up on. This they can show me in creating their poster.

## References

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