THE UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHAMPTON
School of Education

AN EVALUATION OF BAG BOOKS MULTI-SENSORY STORIES

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1. Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a research study commissioned by the Bag Books Charity and carried out by researchers from the Centre for Education and Research within the School of Education at the University of Northampton. The research was carried out between September and December 2013.

The research was undertaken to answer the following research questions.

- How are Bag Books being used in schools with learners with profound and multiple learning difficulties/other special educational needs?

- What is the perceived impact of Bag Books from the perspectives of those using them/aware of them?

- What do users like and dislike about the products, and what suggestions do they have for improvement?

The study identifies that Bag Books are used in a multiplicity of ways with a wide range of students across the whole range of special educational needs, in large groups, small groups and individually. Most storytelling sessions observed did not adhere to Bag Books guidelines.

Bag Books are felt to be a helpful tool for supporting students' learning, supporting the delivery of the curriculum – not only with regard to English but across subject areas – and supporting assessment.

A number of factors that respondents liked about Bag Books are discussed. These relate to the stories, the materials and children's reactions to them. Areas of concern are also noted, and respondents' suggestions for improvements or development are identified. These relate to the stories, the materials, modes of presentation and information.

2. Storytelling

As Nicola Grove writes (2013, p1), '*telling stories is one of the simplest, most enjoyable and most transformative activities on earth*'. Storytelling exists in all cultures and all settings, and stories have been used to entertain, to make sense of the world and events, to share understanding and to help with coping and healing since time immemorial.

However Smith, writing in 2004, argues that storytelling seemed to have fallen out of favour, both in society in general and in education. He notes that fewer parents spend time telling their children the traditional 'bedtime story', as their offspring are increasingly entertained via TVs, computers and other digital media. At the same time, he argues that within the National Curriculum, from

Year 4 upwards, storytelling is superseded by activities such as reading aloud, discussion and interviews. A decade later, Grove (2013) is still concerned that the oral component of stories has been minimised, and identifies that all activities relating to story and narrative have been pigeon-holed within 'literacy' and 'literature'.

Thankfully, storytelling is a hardy activity, and there has been a resurgence of interest in the role of storytelling across education in general and with regard to specific areas of activity and populations of students in particular. Authors such as Grugeon and Gardner (2000) and Daniel (2012) have argued for the importance of storytelling in primary education – not only within English but across the whole curriculum. Storytelling has been shown to be effective in improving language skills in secondary school pupils (Joffe, 2013). And the value of storytelling has been identified for, among others, children dealing with bereavement (Dowling, 2010), children on the autism spectrum (Howley and Arnold, 2005) and children – and adults – with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) (Park, 2013).

2.1 Storytelling and individuals with PMLD

'Profound and multiple learning difficulties' (PMLD) is a term used to describe students who have profound intellectual impairment in addition to more than one other disability (Cartwright and Wind-Cowie, 2005). This addition disability may be a sensory impairment (such as visual impairment or hearing loss), cerebral palsy or other physical disabilities, an autism spectrum condition, mental illness, medical conditions such as epilepsy or a debilitating or degenerative medical condition. There is no fixed definition of the term, and individuals with similar conditions and needs may be described as having PMLD or profound intellectual and multiple disabilities (PIMD). Individuals with multiple disabilities and visual impairment (MDVI) may also be identified as having PMLD. In this report the term PMLD is used to describe this range of conditions.

Sensory storytelling – storytelling supported by the use of relevant objects chosen for their sensory qualities and appeal – has been identified as an enjoyable activity for individuals with PMLD (Fuller, 1999) and is in regular use with younger children, older children and adults (Boer and Wikkerman, 2008; Aird and Heath, 1999; Pidgeon, 1999). Over the last decade, significant research has been undertaken in the UK, in conjunction with the charity PAMIS, and abroad – principally in the Netherlands and Germany – into the use of storytelling with individuals with PMLD, particularly through the use of multisensory storytelling techniques. Research has identified that multisensory storytelling can help individuals with PMLD cope with sensitive issues, such as living with epilepsy, dental treatment or sexual behaviour (Lambe and Hogg, 2013; Young *et al*. 2011). Such stories can help with the development of literacy

skills (Fornefeld, 2013; Watson, 2002) and can support interaction and enjoyment (Park, 2013).

Much of the research stresses both the importance of individualisation and the need to adhere to protocols. PAMIS has developed guidelines for multisensory storytelling (these can be found in ten Brug *et al.,* 2012, p351). Their PAMIS multisensory stories are described as

> *"personal to the intended listener…developed through collaboration between the parent, the teacher (or other professional) and a member of PAMIS staff whose role was to co-ordinate the activity* (Lambe and Hogg, 2013, p88)."

However ten Brug *et al*. (2012), evaluating stories used with 49 individuals with PMLD, identify that even when stories are constructed in an individualised way, according to these guidelines, there is significant variation in how they are then read. In their study, they observed the PAMIS guidelines being followed in only 1.3% of storytelling sessions; issues identified as problematic included the speed of delivery and, most commonly, adding language spontaneously to the original text. Penne *et al*. (2012), observed staff interaction with people with PMLD during multisensory storytelling sessions. Only moderate scores with regard to sensitivity, responsivity, effectiveness, acceptance, pleasure, expressiveness and warmth were achieved; and the need for training to enable professionals to achieve high quality interaction with individuals with PMLD in storytelling sessions is identified.

The research findings, and the assumptions underpinning them, raise as many questions as they answer. Do multisensory stories for individuals really need to be as highly individualised as is suggested? Can the same story be used with more than one individual; or with groups? If 98.7% of storytelling sessions fail to adhere to the guidelines, how necessary or appropriate are those guidelines? If stories are read with such inconsistency, how much credence can be given to the findings of quantitative research into their use? To what extent is storytelling a technical task – following the protocol – and to what extent is it an art?

2.2 Bag Books

These questions are of particular interest with regard to the range of sensory stories manufactured by Bag Books. Bag Books (the charity) was established by Chris Fuller in 1993 to design and produce a range of multisensory stories (Fuller, 2013), primarily to be read to children and adults with PMLD, either individually or in groups. Fifty-two different stories have been created over the past two decades: about half are currently still 'in print'. The stories comprise large individual page cards and objects which participants in storytelling sessions can explore through touch, smell, hearing and sight. Each story comes with a

script and is packaged in a sturdy box. Bag Books also provides specialist multisensory storytellers who visit schools, libraries, day centres and other settings. The company has produced a DVD and training guidelines (Bag Books, 2011) to support their use by teachers and other professionals and parents.

Though their design is based upon years of experience of working with individuals with PMLD, Bag Books are produced to a template format and are clearly not designed with any one individual end user in mind. As such, multisensory stories of this kind are a resource about which little research has been undertaken.

3. The research

The Centre for Education and Research (CeSNER) at University of Northampton was commissioned by the Bag Books charity in 2013 to undertake a research study to investigate the use of Bag Books in educational settings in England and to evaluate their products. It was agreed with the charity that the study would investigate the following research questions.

- How are Bag Books being used in schools with learners with profound and multiple learning difficulties/other special educational needs?

- What is the perceived impact of Bag Books from the perspectives of those using them/aware of them?

- What do users like and dislike about the products, and what suggestions do they have for improvement?

The development of the research tools, fieldwork and analysis was undertaken by two researchers from CeSNER: Dr David Preece and Mrs Yu Zhao.

3.1 Where did we carry out the research?

The fieldwork was conducted between September and December 2013 in 5 special schools in England selected by the researchers. All of these schools had purchased a number of Bag Books products and had used them over a prolonged period (5 years or more). The data collection tools (interview schedule and observation schedule) were piloted at a special primary school for students with complex needs in a shire county market town: as only minimal amendments were made to the tools after piloting, the decision was made to include data gathered at this time in the dataset.

Data were then collected in 4 further schools:

- a school in a small town in the south-east for students aged 3-19 with severe or profound learning difficulties, and learning needs within the autism spectrum
- a specialist sensory and physical college for students aged 2-19 with visual impairments, multiple disabilities and visual impairments, and profound and multiple learning difficulties

- an urban day school for students aged 2-19 with a range of severe learning difficulties, including profound and multiple learning difficulties

- a suburban school for students aged 2-19 with severe and multiple learning difficulties.

3.2 How did we carry out the research?

The research was carried out through by interviewing staff in these settings who used Bag Books and sensory storytelling approaches, and through observing storytelling sessions. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Northampton's Research Ethics Committee, and the research was carried out in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines for Education Research* (BERA, 2011). Informed consent was obtained from all respondents and from the parents of all students observed. Respondents were aware that they could withdraw from the process at any time. All respondents and settings have been anonymised in this report, and all names used are pseudonyms.

We interviewed teachers and teaching assistants in schools where Bag Books had been used for a significant length of time: this decision was made to ensure that interviewees would know about the products and that they would be in use in the setting. However, not all interviewees had a similar depth of experience. There was a continuum of familiarity with Bag Books and their use, ranging from some people who had only recently started using them to others who were highly experienced and who had used them for 10 years or more.

Twenty-seven interviews were carried out with:

- 17 class teachers
- 6 teaching assistants
- 1 x Deputy Head Teacher
- 1 x Head of Post-16 Education
- 1 x School Librarian
- 1 x coordinator of a charity providing a library service for children with visual impairments.

Eighteen observations were undertaken of sessions where multi-sensory storytelling was being used. The researchers also visited the Bag Books site and interviewed personnel there.

Transcripts of the interviews and the records of the observations were analysed using QSR NVivo 10 software. Thematic qualitative analysis was undertaken to identify the key themes identified by respondents. These are reported in Section 4 below.

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EXAMPLE 1

***"The Band Rehearsal"* – using a Bag Books story as a lunchtime activity**

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Context
'*The Band Rehearsal'* was used to provide a lunchtime activity to a group of visually impaired students, many of whom were fed by gastrostomy. Eight students (3 boys and 5 girls), all of whom were in wheelchairs, participated in the session, which was led by Marie, a senior teaching assistant, supported by two other teaching assistants.

What did we observe?
The story was told in a large classroom, with the students in a circle. Marie, the storyteller was in the centre of the circle.

The story was told in a way that adhered extremely closely to the script and to the model of delivery in the Bag Books training guide and DVD. Nonetheless some amendments had been made: a number of maracas and ukuleles were passed around the group, and at the line, "Shall we all play together" a one Direction song was played.

At the end of the story, a plenary was held, with Marie asking her support staff, "Shall we talk about something each child liked? Shall we talk about something each child did well?" The teaching assistants identified activities the students did well, for example asking for a turn, opening her hand, using her voice. Each student was offered a choice of two objects, asked which they preferred and supported to make a choice.

Key points
• The story held the attention of a large group of young people over an extended period of time
• Most students were highly interested in the materials and exploring them. The story was presented in such a way that even a child who was highly tactile defensive was engaged by the auditory content.
• The explicit identification of students' achievement at the end of the story made it easy to link the activity to their individual targets, even though the story was 'purely done as a fun activity'.

Teacher's comments
"The story that I chose today, 'The Band Rehearsal'…I do that with our children who are visually impaired because it's very auditory and there's obviously lots of different sounds going on, and so that works really well for them. Although today I found that it worked really well for our children who are not because they enjoyed the story equally, so that was lovely.

"I tend to go by the children in the class, I pick obviously a fun story, which most of them are. And yes, I just do it for a real sensory experience really. And I might try and put my own spin on it…so that One Direction song was, you know, that's not the Multi-Tones but hey, it was nice to add that in because you saw the kids' faces light up when that song comes on and they recognised it. So I might not always go by the book exactly. I will always read the script but I might add little things in to adapt for our children.

"Obviously in this school we have our children who don't eat. Twice a week I am on a dinner duty in the classes with the children that are gastro-fed and that's when I'll do the stories with them then. And because I usually tend to do the same story for about six weeks, so usually a term, so that hopefully after about two to three weeks they're anticipating what's coming next and that's quite a nice thing to do. So I don't chop and change stories, I usually keep to the same one for about a term. It's purely done as a fun activity, and it's great."

4. Findings

The findings are reported under four headings.

- What do people like about Bag Books?

- What benefits can be gained from using Bag Books?

- What concerns or problems do people have regarding Bag Books?

- What suggestions do people have?

4.1 What do people like about Bag Books?

"Storytelling is fantastic! I enjoy storytelling and I think equally my pupils enjoy being told stories and I believe it's essential for learning aspects of life."

Overall, respondents were extremely positive about the Bag Books multisensory stories, and all of the teachers, teaching assistants and other professionals interviewed consider them a useful and valuable resource. Things that respondents like about Bag Books can be grouped into three themes: the stories, the materials and students' responses.

4.1.1 The stories

"I think they are amazingly clever. The simplest ideas are always the best, aren't they?"

Respondents identified many characteristics of the Bag Books stories that they like. They were generally very positive about the **process** of how Bag Books stories were told.

"And so the children can see all of us. It's not just the one person at the front doing it…they all get involved as well. Because we go round to show them each page and of course the other adults do it as well."

They spoke positively about the simplicity of the stories, and that they were pitched at an appropriate level for early learners.

"It's simplistic… but it has to be simplistic because of the students' needs. With some of the students that I work with actually it is even more about the activities and the sequencing of the activities than the story. They may not get the verbal instructions. So it's very much about the ideas."

"They are books with resources, with toys, with objects of reference and this is what my children need because half of them cannot talk, so cannot explain. Some of them just use one or two key words so it is essential for children to visualise the objects we are talking about, to touch to feel, so the understanding comes through the sensory activities."

"One thing I like is that because the kind of things that you are using and that you're talking about and the stories are so…I wouldn't say basic, that's probably not the right word. But because there's not a lot of things going on, they're broken down so it helps our children understand a bit more."

Respondents praised the **concreteness** of the stories, and of the numerous **sensory aspects** that are built into the various stories.

"I like the interaction between the person telling the story and the actual object and then going to the learner. I think it teaches them about sensory awareness, it highlights and stimulates all their senses".

The value of having stories that relate to the **real life** experience of students was highlighted again and again. In some cases these relate to real life events or activities that may occur infrequently.

"They've got some really unusual things but things that they might come into contact with perhaps, like the smell of a bonfire."

> *"I like them because they are very real. There's nice resources that go with the stories and there's kind of like a real life setting, do you know what I mean? We've got one story called 'Lost in London', where they talk about going on the bus with the Oyster card. It's a real Oyster card, there's a real 'oo oo' sound when they swipe it. That's all good – that's what I like about them."*

In other cases they relate to activities that students engage in on a regular basis, about aspects of daily living. '*Desmond*' is about getting up and going to school; '*The Uninvited Guests'* takes the students on a room by room tour of a house.

This **real life** focus was felt to give the stories **meaningfulness**, which respondents identified as an important factor.

> *"Like I was doing 'Desmond' and, you know, everyone can relate to that, you're getting ready for school and the bus comes. Or Grandma's coming to visit and we have to clean. So those stories about real life they can relate to. Our children often enjoy stories that we don't think are super exciting but because it's about their life."*

> *"The resources that go with are everyday life resources. That's important. It's not confusing objects or things like that."*

The stories were felt to be of an **appropriate length** for students –

> *"Each session, I mean following the actual sort of the crib sheets…they're not very long, which is brilliant for the children with PMLD."*

– and were felt to be vividly written, and to have an **energy** that makes them enjoyable to tell and to experience.

> *"So we do get in character and I think it's good to get into character so they can get the full feel of what's going on in the story."*

> *"There's the energy is in those two stories as well, you can really hype the energy up. Then the children really, really enjoy them."*

Finally, respondents praised the **versatility** of Bag Books stories. As well as supporting educational activities and outcomes (see 4.2 below), people enjoy the fact that

> *"…because they are so useable you can actually use them at wet play times and things like that, or if there's been a situation in class that has to be dealt with, if lots of staff needed to be somewhere else or something, they can instantly be used by anybody.*

"They are completely ready for immediate use and anybody can use them because the script is so clear and very helpful."

4.1.2 The materials

Respondents were also positive about the Bag Books materials. Bag Books is considered to be a **trustworthy** and **reliable** organisation to deal with –

"We've never really had a problem with them at all. They've been brilliant. They come, you know… as soon as they are ready they arrive. We've never - need to replace things."

– and the fact that complete multisensory stories are available as a **ready-made** resource was felt to be extremely helpful for teachers working with pupils for whom typical storybooks require significant adaptation to be made accessible.

"Well I think initially what I liked was that somebody's done all the work for you, you know? As a teacher I've always worked with students with PMLD… so you get into the swing of choosing a story thinking you've got to make it accessible. So we'll have to do this or make this or find where to buy whatever… And this was something that was in a box, all ready, done, off you go. There was no thinking you had to do. So, from a lazy point of view, really…they're great."

The high quality of the **construction** and the **durability** of the stories were commented on by almost every interviewee.

"I think the quality of the things that are in the Bag Books is excellent. They really have been given a good hammering, especially some of the more favourite stories, I must admit… I have always been impressed with the quality and the durability of things."

"That's why I like them, they are really well made. They're very robust and you can't - we've got books and things that we use fall apart, but Bag Books don't."

The **design** of the stories, with each object usually being attached to a large, board was viewed favourably, both in terms of facilitating storytelling and also with regard to ensuring that vital pieces of stories do not go missing.

"I really like that they're on white boards, you know, high contrast… I think it is important that they are mounted on a solid board so that you can have it on your lap. Because sometimes I tell stories in the classroom around the table but in a library it's not like that, it's on bean bags, on soft sofas and so on. And so having it on the lap is just that much better in those situations that it's on board. I mean if you had them on soft board, let's say, laminated

thing, it probably wouldn't last as long either. So for me, I think that's a great advantage about it."

"Another thing about Bag Books that's good is because each page is on a big thick piece of card… so it is something they can hold, you know, it's very tactile. Whereas with a real book you can't take the pages out… and even though you can resource it yourself, the props are all bits all over the place. But because they're attached, that's good, and it's nice and structured for me, because I know which is page 1 and 2, and I'm not worrying and going, "Oh, I need the bucket, I need the bit with the…whatever". So, it's good."

4.1.3 Students like them

Finally, and crucially, respondents stated that they liked Bag Books because it was so clear that students they worked with enjoy them. Numerous respondents spoke of how learners across a range of special educational needs relate to, interact with and enjoy the stories.

"Yes, there's some particular ones that we use quite a lot. One is 'The Haircut'. And it was hysterical because the children just absolutely loved it, especially when the bald cap came out of the end and stuff… and we popped it on their heads and there were little tiny bit of tufts of hair and we used to then have a mirror so that they could see exactly what they looked like. And all of the children, even those with quite profound difficulties, would laugh and find it absolutely hysterical."

"The students love them. Absolutely love them. It's great. That's where their own personalities can come out, through using the books."

"I used to have a child in my class who had autism. He found it hard to sit in the circle so he used to go away and, when it was his turn, if he wanted to come back he could come back. And when it was the story 'The Party', he used to come back and sit there. He'd sit with his head to the side and listen to the story and he'd want to smell…and he used to pull the sticks so he could feel all the ribbon on the stick. So it was really good."

4.2 What benefits can be gained from using Bag Books?

School staff identified a wide range of perceived benefits regarding Bag Books These can be grouped under four general headings:

- appropriateness for a wide range of learners

- supporting learning

- supporting assessment

- supporting the curriculum

4.2.1 Appropriateness for a wide range of learners

Bag Books are designed primarily for individuals with PMLD (Bag Books, 2011), and respondents reported using them primarily with this group of students. However their use is not restricted to this group. As the deputy head teacher of a primary school explained,

> *"When they were brought in they were really earmarked for children with profound and multiple difficulties, physical difficulties - hearing, visual impairment. But as we've got confident with them and we've seen how beneficial they've been to those children it's almost like, well actually why do they need to be just for those children? They can be for all because none of us would sit and just read a story from a book and just have the text anyway…*

> *"We would always use additional resources to support the story and props and things that the children can engage with and join in with. So (Bag Books) isn't a set that we only pull out when we've got children with those difficulties…we use them for all the children really."*

Some teachers reported that they have found Bag Books unsuitable for use with, for example, students on the autism spectrum.

> *"We don't use them with the autism group because they have a problem with waiting for their turn so obviously it wouldn't work…"*

However, others spoke of how they have found them an effective tool for working with such students.

> *"I've used them with a range of children and I find that they really can, they are really accessible for all children, regardless. Children with ASD, you'd think maybe that they would be a bit abstract perhaps, but it doesn't seem to be that case. It seems to be that they're very accessible. I think the repetition in the way that you can deliver them; the props are very clear, of course, it's bringing an idea to life for the children and they're able to touch, feel or just have a sound from them."*

The majority of the storytelling sessions that we observed were undertaken with students with PMLD or MSI. However, we did see Bag Books being used with, and enjoyed by, students with other special educational needs such as autism, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and behavioural difficulties (see *Case Study 3: "Jason's Wish"*).

4.2.2 Supporting learning

Bag Books are considered a very helpful tool with regard to supporting students' learning. They are felt to perform this function in a number of ways.

They are considered to be appropriate for **individual work** and for large or small **group work.**

> *"It's nice for doing individual work, in the library'.*

> *"The bonfire story I did use as a big group because it was - it just suited that, for the children's needs. But in other cases I have kind of split the group. Sometimes ten's quite a big group to deliver a Bag Book."*

Teachers felt that Bag Books can help students to engage with lesson content: **engagement** was a word that cropped up in the interviews again and again.

> *"I think that they help children to be able to engage in a story."*

> *"Even if they perhaps haven't got an in depth understanding of the story and that, they can still be part of the session and engage."*

Teachers cited numerous examples of how children's interest has been aroused and held by the content and presentation of the stories. Many purposely leave the materials out after the end of their storytelling sessions for children to explore and use, watching to see if they play with the items or re-tell the story.

The benefits of Bag Books for supporting the development of students' **communication skills** were noted within all of the sites. The typical structure of the Bag Books session – each child being presented with the story objects in turn – was identified as providing each child with multiple communicative opportunities per session.

> *"You can establish flexibility through how you present the stories. So initially a child might communicate with me but they might not communicate with you. So then gradually you can – through how you present the story – start with the child doing the activity with one person and then try to encourage the same with another person, and perhaps then with two people. This way they can generalise those communication skills, it's not just 'I can do this in one room, in one situation, in one context with one person'. You can broaden out from that so that they become more communicative young people."*

This included providing the student with opportunities to **express their preferences**, and it was identified that Bag Books sessions can both contribute to helping others understand the individuals' likes and dislikes, and to giving the students a **sense of agency and empowerment**.

"'I don't want it', push it away. That's good because they are telling you that they don't like it. It's all communication. I'll know if they don't like it and that's very important…because often they won't be given those choices."

The structure of a Bag Books storytelling session –with the objects being presented in the same sequence each time, and with each child being presented with the tactile objects in turn – means that the stories were identified as being extremely helpful in the development of **turn taking** and **anticipation**, as well as with regard to **remembering.**

"We all sit in a nice circle and we make it all a nice atmosphere and everything, and they all sit and they all take their turn. They all wait for the other one. And we've always got different responses, the way they remember smells, the way they remember the touch and stuff, so they've never - it never feels a rush. And they anticipate…they laugh and they clap their hands because… they anticipate it and they do show excitement, they show interest and they sit there and really watch. So you know they are really listening to you".

"I think the props really help with - they capture children's attention and that really helps the child to then wait, to turn take, to get a sense of sharing. If they are particularly excited by a prop that's coming their way, they are more likely to wait in anticipation of that."

Anticipation is not limited to waiting one's turn within the story. For many children, just seeing the Bag Books box, or a key object associated with a story, was reported as being sufficient to lead them to anticipate an enjoyable experience.

"There was a certain girl, we used to get the book out and we used to get a certain object out and she used to know straight away what this story was… and she'd tap her head or she'd tap her legs and she'd get all excited because she knows we're going to be polishing. And when we used to get the pot out for the polishing she used to tap her nose…."

"It was the anticipation of everything, the items coming out of the box…we had really, really good fun with them I must admit, when I used to do them. And if you'd read the book a couple of times, then when you read it again, say in a couple of weeks' time, you would perhaps start getting the duster out, and it would just be poking out of the top of the bag, and there would be this mass excitement and anticipation that something absolutely brilliant was just about to happen."

Bag Books are considered to help students to learn by taking account of the **sensory difficulties and differences** that may impact upon students, and using a range of sensory media – including familiar and unfamiliar objects, smells and sounds – to 'tell the story'.

"They're very good because you get lots of different ways of telling the story. So they have the tactile way, when they can touch different objects, feel them, their different textures as well. Very often you've got the sound coming with it, or the smell…in this story actually we had smell, touch and the visual prompts for the pupils. So it was really good because it's tackling different sensory issues that they might have."

"Things are tactile so they'll get to feel different tactile experiences and they'll get to compare as well. Like the rope. They get to pull a rope. They might not get a chance to pull a rope usually."

Finally, Bag Books are viewed as an important tool to **support social opportunities and interaction** - between the students and staff, and between the students.

"Using Bag Books opens up such an opportunity, it opens up such socialising opportunities. And also for our kids, directional: 'On your left … on your right', you know, 'pass it forward … pass it back'.

"It's really lovely to have something again that you can spend time, interact with a child and they are able to enjoy, have a story told to them. I think it develops their relationship with people."

"I use (Bag Books sessions) as a time for developing not just their sensory skills but also their social skills, you know, about listening, interacting, sharing with a friend, you know. So that's what we're looking to assess when we are doing stories with children, very much so. So sometimes they are one on one with the adult, sometimes I get the children to choose, 'Who do you want to sit with or be with?'"

4.2.3 Supporting assessment

As the quote above indicates, teachers identified that as well as being a useful tool to support learning across a range of pupils, Bag Books are a valuable vehicle which teachers can use to support their **assessments** (for example, with regard to the *P Scales* (QCA, 2009; QCDA, 2011) – see Appendix 1), both with regard to the students' **overall learning levels** and with regard to specific **individual targets and goals**.

The suitability of Bag Books for children functioning at early developmental levels was identified again and again.

"We are working with students at quite an early level, so we are looking probably in terms of B-Squared, in terms of National Curriculum levels we're looking at anywhere up to about P4. So P1, 2 and 3 are…they are all sensory and experiential, and then P4 is beginning to put some of those together. And that's really where Bag Books are beneficial."

> *"You've got that whole range, P1 through to about P4-ish I suppose, where you can show progress in speaking and listening aspects to the curriculum and, more sensibly, just in terms of their real communication skills."*

Numerous examples were given of where – either in a planned way or serendipitously – Bag Books have provided assessment information.

> *"If you're doing a page and they're touching it and you see that they respond to it…they might pull their hand away and then put it back. So they are showing they are being curious, they are interested in their environment, all those sort of things for like P Level 2 or P Level 3 and I'm thinking in my mind, 'Okay, they're doing this'. And if you do that story over the week and you get more and more responses and they're definite, you can be ticking those off as achieved because that child's showing that they are at that level".*

> *"It was through Bag Books that I discovered that one little boy in my class can read just normal print. One of the pages in 'Gran's Visit' is when the letter comes through the letterbox and they open it. I've sort of cheated and I've written in there, 'Gran's coming to visit'. Anyway, he opens it up and he just sat and read it. So that's another assessment. I had guessed that he could read print because we have lots of symbols with print underneath and he's saying it but you can never be sure. This was just written text and he read it clearly, so again it's given me assessment information."*

Teachers identified that Bag Books sessions can be effectively used to work on students' individual targets.

> *"It's kind of up to the person doing the Bag Books to be creative, to help the students work towards their cognitive targets. I do think that they're useful in helping students work on their targets."*

We observed one multi-sensory storytelling session – not using Bag Books, but a story of the teacher's on devising, and on very similar lines – where the whole Science lesson was delivered through the medium of a story. Activities within the story – which used a trip to the seaside as the vehicle for the exploration of hard and soft objects – were explicitly linked to student's Individual Education Plans and targets. These targets were identified at the start of the lesson, so that teaching assistants working with individual children were fully aware of what the children were working on and what they should be observing and assessing. A number of teachers have suggested that Bag Books could be developed with explicit links to subjects and topics, and this observed lesson suggests a way in which this could be done.

4.2.4 Supporting the curriculum

Bag Books are felt to be helpful in making curriculum topics accessible to a wide range of students, including those who for whom such access might otherwise be restricted. In all of the schools that we visited, Bag Books are used to support the teaching of **English** and **literacy**.

> *"We use them for literacy, absolutely. It is around literacy and it is around communication. Lots of our work, communication runs all the way through it. Bag Books are fabulous for this."*

> *"Normally we use Bag Books in English."*

The point was made, by teachers and librarians, that *"Bag Books are literature"*. Staff within one school spoke further of how they view Bag Books as an important tool in making **drama** accessible for students.

> *"A lot of our children haven't got that ability to imagine and to join in with role play. So I think (Bag Books) provide role play in a sense and drama in a scaffolding sense. It's still role play, it's still drama because that's one of the only ways they can access it. And that practice, practicing it in that kind of structured setting, you know, we've seen children then go out into an informal session or free time and be able to perhaps transfer that skill over. I think it's really beneficial."*

As well as using Bag Books to support English and literacy in teaching children with PMLD, teachers gave examples of how they have used them with other groups of students. These included those on the autism spectrum:

> *"I did do a little bit up in Key Stage 2 Autism, I did a couple of years up there as well, and…it's a very sort of structured literacy hour and, you know, you have your text that you do for the week. I did use a couple of Bag Books as they linked to the topic. Even the older children enjoy it because they get a turn and they get to do whatever that action is, or feel it, or play the thing. And it does, I think - you know like they say if you do something you remember it better than if somebody was just telling you."*

Teachers working with older or more able children sometimes use a Bag Books story as a fun and interactive way of introducing a topic, which can then lead on to further investigation of the issues raised.

> *"You have your literacy hour and you'd have a text and from that text you'd be doing your sentences. And it's just a different type of text. Because you have to do lots of different types, you know, stories, poems, information, non-fiction. So I used 'Gran's Visit'. We were talking about Gran coming to visit and how you have to get the house tidy and those types of things. And then we moved on to, 'So, does anyone here see their Gran?' 'Do they come?' 'Do you have to get the house tidy?' 'Do you help Mum?' And then we linked it to writing that way."*

While many teachers view Bag Books purely as a tool for English and literacy, or for keeping students entertained over a rainy lunchtime, others feel that they can be helpful in supporting work in **other curriculum areas**. Appropriate Bag Books are used to teach topics across the curriculum: in **Religious Education**, **Geography**, **Science**, and **Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE)**, as well as to support **cross-curricular** work.

> *"We work on a topic base in the school. So you try and link everything in with the topics. So if we're doing 'transport' we might use 'The Hot Air Balloon'. If we're doing something on 'ourselves' we might use 'Gran's Visit'. I always try and link things in. I'm not sure about other classes: further up the school they have more modules, so they tend to - their books may be used more in isolation, like…that's what we do for our literacy. In our class, we like to hang everything on our topic."*

> *"Last term we were doing 'holidays'. So I took one - there's one about somebody being safe at sea and I know I added water to that and a few other things and the kids absolutely loved it. We did that for half a term."*

> *"At the moment in Science we're doing about growth, so we use 'The Little Seed', which is a good Bag Book because it is telling the children and it's showing them how things grow from seed, and really at their level. Because… because it's quite complicated. Things are complicated in life to explain to these children, so that really kind of gives them an idea of how things do work and grow."*

EXAMPLE 2

"The Fairground" – individualising a Bag Books story for a specific student

Context
'*The Fairground'* was presented in an afternoon (1.30-2.00) session in the school's sensory room. Philippa, an experienced teaching assistant who has used Bag Books for many years, had individualised the story with a particular focus on the interests and needs of Julie, a student with PMLD in the school's post-16 unit. The story was presented to Julie and two male students from the post-16 unit, one of whom, like Julie, uses a wheelchair. Philippa was supported by 2 further teaching assistants.

What did we observe?
The session took place in the sensory room and was very lively. The structure and storyline of the original story had been kept, but many of the objects had been changed. BIGmack communicators, which Julie was familiar with, had replaced the voice pads provided with the story. The duck-hooking activity in the story had been changed, as Julie was not able physically to do this – this was replaced by 'pick up duck'.

The next part of the story is about the dodgem car, represented by a steering wheel. Julie did not recognise a steering wheel, so this was replaced by a more familiar seatbelt. The wording of the story was amended to 'Make sure you've got

your seatbelt on!' The spider's web in the story was replaced by a much more sensory dangling net, which moved in the breeze created by a fan in the room. At the end of the story, the song 'Show Me the Way To Go Home; was played.

Key points
- The story was individualised to meet the specific needs of one student
- Materials and wording were adapted to match the experience of the student and the environment in which the story was taking place
- The story was presented in a way to incorporate lot of music, lights, sound and movement

Teacher's comments
"Even though this story has been adapted especially for Julie, it's better presented to her as part of a small group. When there's no one else there, it's not as good. She's better when there's others around her, to get her to listen to others… I think it's very boring for her to just hear my voice.

"You know, it's the others that actually get her motivated, listening to the different sounds they're making and the interaction with them."

4.3 What concerns or problems do people have regarding Bag Books?
Respondents were also asked about any aspects of Bag Books that they did not like, or that caused them concern. Some respondents were entirely positive about Bag Books, and stated that they were wholly satisfied with the products. Others voiced some issues, as identified below.

Despite the large number of respondents who praised the stories' simplicity, there were also those who consider them, in particular some of the more recent stories, to be **complicated**. This was felt to increase the likelihood of inconsistency in presentation, which could lead to students (and professionals) not being able to follow the story.

> *"I think sometimes if you were to say to a staff member, 'Oh, could you do this Bag Book', or whatever, because it's too complicated it might not get done in the same way…and then you haven't got that consistency."*
>
> *I find the newer ones that have been developed in recent years a bit too complicated. I think they've got too many things in them. For example, like 'The Fairground'. I think there's probably about 15 or 16 pages[1]. Sometimes there's pages that don't have the cards, you've got an object. And to try and organise that - so I think they've gone a bit over complicated. I think simple is best."*
>
> *"This one story…it just didn't make sense. It didn't make sense to me at all, and it was like, "Well, actually I'm not enthused by this…how am I going to make it interesting?" It stumped me."*

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[1] In fact, '*The Fairground*' has fewer pages than this. Whether the respondent had confused this story with another is unclear.

A number of comments were made about the **packaging**. Many respondents questioned why the products are called Bag Books, when they come in a box. Some people felt that this may be potentially confusing for children – and also for adults. Some respondents also commented that the packaging is plain and unattractive.[2]

> *"They are a bit boring to look at, the boxes are not inspirational. We want children to see books are friendly and good to share, but they look cumbersome… They don't draw the child in to read them. It's only when you get them out and you get immersed in it that it does its work, really."*

Again, while many respondents praised the real life, real world nature of Bag Books, some criticised what they considered to be a **lack of variety** and **lack of excitement** in the stories.

> *"A real difficulty is that by the time they are at Key Stage 4, they've been in school since they were two, you know, and they've been doing the same stories over and over, really. So you've got to offer them something a bit different."*

> *"I found that they lack a little bit of 'oomph', you know?"*

One respondent felt that the white boards used in the more recent stories could be **dangerous**.[3]

> *"One thing I would say is about the boards… I would have them filed so that they're rounded because their corners are quite sharp and potentially it's dangerous."*

Perhaps the most interesting comments in this area related to perceptions about the **importance of individualisation**, and the difficulties inherent in using a generic product with students with PMLD and other special educational needs. This was summed up by one respondent as follows.

> *"I think there's a problem with anything that's produced to try and meet a range of needs. It's not going to be developed specifically for individual kids. I've seen Bag Books being used in schools and with big groups and in some instances quite small groups…and how much each child gets out of it depends on their individual circumstances. So I saw some kids who were having a great time and just absolute rapture on their faces and sort of fixated on one particular element of the story. And other children who…perhaps it's just*

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[2] Bag Books packaging was changed in 2010: boxes now have a brief description of the story and a photograph of the pack contents printed onto labels stuck on the boxes. The company also offers a replacement box service. However it is clear that many respondents were unaware of this.

[3] Bag Books report that they have been using the materials for over 15 years without having had any health and safety issues reported to them.

after lunch and they've just had some medication and they've just dozed off, kind of enjoying what was going on around them but not necessarily interacting with it. It's a tricky one isn't it?"

The ways in which teachers used the storytelling materials was also impacted by the nature of the students they were teaching. In the storytelling sessions we observed, there were some in which teachers were working with a group of children whose abilities and needs were similar, and others in which class groups were comprised of children across a wide range of conditions and needs. In some schools, children with PMLD were together in the same class; in others a class of 5 children included a mix of children with PMLD, ASD and Down Syndrome.

4.4 What suggestions do people have?

Respondents were asked if they had any suggestions with regard to how Bag books could be improved, or things they would like to see. A wide range of suggestions were made, which can be grouped under four headings: the stories, materials, alternative presentation and information.

4.4.1 The stories

A number of suggestions were made with regard to potential stories. These were as follows.

- The charity currently produces some stories targeted to specific curriculum areas, e.g. science (*'What am I?', 'The Little Seed'*), Religious Education (*'The Christmas story', 'Zubair's* Eid'), History (*'Best Time to Live', 'The Museum Mystery'*). The development of further stories that had clearer links to specific **curriculum areas and topics** was recommended.[4]

"Is there one that's sort of linked to maybe going to a church or something? You know, that would be quite good."

- In particular, the development of more stories related to **PSHE** topics.

"Do you know what would be really good? More PSHE and those areas I think would be lovely. Some that are more factual perhaps would be really nice… and they may be really nice for children with ASD to access as well. You know, it could be about…feelings or self-care or something like that. That would be really great. Because when we are developing those ideas for the children and introducing those ideas for the children, unless I'm wrong and they've already got a bank of them and I don't know about them, but that's

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[4] Bag Books is updating its website in June 2014. This will include information for teachers about how stories can link with the curriculum.

the kind of thing that makes you think, 'What do I want to do?'…and, 'How am I going to make it accessible for that pupil?'"

- Stories that introduced **continuity** and featured **development** of the same characters.
"It would be really nice to follow a child through a school. That would be a really useful thing, you know. About how you change and everything."

"What would be good would be something about age, you know, and moving on. It would be nice, say, to develop Desmond…or do one about a child then the same child growing up, perhaps. And adult ones, people getting older. They would do that really well, with those lovely props."

- The development of a **'classics'** series, with adapted versions of popular children's literature across the Key Stages.

- Stories designed to provide more opportunities for **social interaction and movement**.

"They don't have a lot of movement in the stories and it would be really good to have more. Actually, they do in some of them, yes, but it's such an important thing – the more profound their needs, the movement's more important, I think."

4.4.2 The materials
Again a range of suggestions were made about the materials. As well as more **attractive packaging**, many respondents spoke of wishing for clearer **labelling** to identify the topic of the story, in addition to the title.[5]

"Just a brighter box would be nice. So they look prettier on the shelf and they invite people to use them and things like that."

"What I would have liked is some sort of label on the box to give an approximate content. It just currently has the title of the story but if it said, 'About firework night', or 'About a bereavement', or about an emotional aspect…that would be quite helpful to target my use of them even more I think."

"I don't want a label that says 'Literacy Strand 4'. What I do want is something that says 'Links to…', you know, 'a visit to a fire station' or something, so it's got something meaningful. I don't need the numbers."

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[5] Again, the labelling has been updated on post-2010 boxes, and replacement boxes for Bag Books purchased earlier are available. However, the respondents were unaware of this.

Many teachers spoke of how useful it would be to have **extra resources** that match the objects mounted on the boards, which would facilitate storytelling to groups of children. This would be felt to be particularly where there are children with very delayed processing, as this would allow more than one child to explore the object at a time. Some stories do provide multiple items: for example *'Gran's Visit'* is provided with 10 dusters. In many of the storytelling sessions that we observed, the teachers had in fact collected a number of objects similar to ones in the story so that students could, for example, all play music together (in *'Band Rehearsal'*).

> *"It would be nice to have some more resources to go with the story, maybe for two or three of the objects. So that when you do have large groups there's not all this walking around. You might have a teaching assistant with one child either side, and you're able to work with two kids at the same time rather than one person going round the whole group. Because a lot of kids can lose interest after a while. That would be my only thing."*

> *"Another thing about Bag Books is sometimes when…I obviously can't do it when it's a big knocker or something… But when it's a smaller object in there, it would be great if there could be enough for six or seven children so they've all got something at the same time."*

> *"One of the things that would have helped was probably to have had a couple more objects, the same objects, so that a child that needed hand over hand help could, she could have had one where somebody was still sort of helping her feeling and touching and exploring the actual object while the other children were then engaged in this individually."*

It was felt that a **replacement and maintenance** service would be helpful, particularly given that stories typically cost between £50 and £100 each.[6]

> *"They are pretty robust but some of them are coming to the point where they need some repair work. So if, once you've bought into it you could have a sort of ongoing maintenance programme or something, that would be useful."*

Finally, it was felt that in some stories the objects are not of the **quality** that users have come to expect, and that they could be improved.

> *"This one story has got the little toy violin and it's got the little toy maracas… and I think maybe a proper egg shaker or a proper musical instrument would have been better, but then you get into cost, and that's the issue, I suppose."[7]*

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[6] Bag Books has in fact always offered an 'at cost' replacement page service.
[7] Bag Books report that the first production run of *'Band Rehearsal'* had a very small violin, but that the instruments are now four times larger. However, the respondent was not aware of this.

4.4.3 Alternative presentation

A number of respondents suggested that stories might be presented in a variety of different formats. These might include:

- **'Do It Yourself'** versions[8]

  "If the normal Bag Books box costs, say sixty quid with all the bits in it, then you could actually sell it…you could copyright the story and then you could sell that for, say, twenty five and then say but you need to buy or you need to provide a couple of drums and a keyboard. Or whatever instruments you like. So that actually you then supplement it yourself…

  "Because, to be honest, I tend to do that anyway… We tell the story in the sensory room, which means when it comes to the parts at the end when they perform their song to the show, we can press all the switches and have the lights and everything happening."

- **Differentiated** versions. These might include:
  - versions that include **extension** activities for more able students
  - versions with **child-friendly 'text'** provided in Communication in Print or Moon, for example
  - and the choice of having the objects **fixed or not**.

"A little bit more content to the story would get the older children maybe a little bit more engaged. Even diversifying perhaps some bits into plays so you can involve other adults saying little bits, or taking on characters and stuff like that, so there's more to the story telling and more to the literary experience."

"I wonder whether it's possible to look at… I guess it depends on the communication system that individual schools are using…but whether there would be some way of having symbols to support the props that come in the bags, or some kind of communication board with the props on…or some kind of story board maybe using symbols. Or photos. Or whether there could be an option when you are buying the Bag Books…so you have an option of, 'Would you like your Bag Book to come with - ', and then you can perhaps pay extra for a set of symbols, some kind of communication board or actually the option to say no, you don't want that with it, you'll make your own…"

"When you're making Book Bags they're quite expensive; if schools are ordering them they can then say whether they want it on those large pieces of card or they'd rather have them free-standing, you know, as they are."

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[8] Bag Books report that a range of five DIY titles will be launched in the summer of 2014. These are aimed at parents and will be free to download from the Bag Books website.

4.4.4 Information

Some respondents spoke of the strength of their relationship with Bag Books and were very satisfied with communication and information.

> *"Bag Books is a very good company to deal with and Stuart is always helpful with what we need. Our relationship with him is really good, we have a long term relationship with him. We are always keeping in contact to know what's new that has come in. He will advise us sometimes to say, 'Okay, well this is coming in, this might be of interest, we're not doing this but we're going to be doing this now'. He's also come in and done storytelling with groups of students."*

However many respondents felt that they were not aware of the latest information about Bag Books. This seemed to be dependent on the frequency of contact that the school had, and how recently contact took place. One school had bought the entire catalogue in the late 1990s, but was totally unaware of the more recent stories, or that they are no longer packaged in brown cardboard boxes.

> *"I think we've got about fifteen, and I just use the same ones over and over. And it would be nice to know if there were other things."*

Even in schools that have had more recent contact, teachers spoke of difficulties knowing exactly what is available. E-mail was suggested as a good means of contact but it was acknowledged that many schools are cold-called or receive unsolicited emails from numerous companies every week, and that there are often many administrators filtering e-mails who may well not have heard of Bag Books. Catalogues, that could be taken home and referred to, were suggested as potentially helpful by some, though the point was made that "*there can be too much paper*.

EXAMPLE 3

"Jason's Wish" – using a Bag Books story as a basis for discussion

Context
'*Jason's Wish'* was used in a late morning (11.45-12.15) session. Anne, an experienced teacher who has used Bag Books for many years, teaches a class of 9 boys aged 10-11 years. All are verbal, and have a range of conditions including autism spectrum disorder, ADHD and social/emotional/behavioural difficulties. One pupil used a wheelchair. Anne was supported by 3 teaching assistants.

What did we observe?
At the start of the lesson the classroom was set out in its usual layout. The children took their chairs and laid them out under Anne's direction so that all the adults and pupils were in a circle.

At the start of the story some of the pupils seemed disengaged and in our discussion afterwards the researchers agreed that we had been concerned that the pupils might have been too able or too lively for Bag Books. However Anne was a very vivid storyteller; and interest in the materials – 'That's not grass!', 'Look at this bell – it's got the Queen's crown on it!', 'Is that dog food real or fake?' – and the high level of physical action in the story – e.g. poking the stick in the ground while shouting 'It's not fair' – soon drew them in. Within minutes the students were all focused on the story.

Engagement was held throughout the story, which lasted for fifteen minutes. Afterwards, the teacher went around the class, asking students if they had dogs at home and if so about their size, breed, colour and names. Within seconds, the whole group was engaged in a well-ordered discussion which lasted for almost ten minutes. About a minute before the end of the lesson, the teacher drew the discussion to a close and (to the accompaniment of the 'Countdown' clock and music) the students put the classroom back a it had been at the start.

Key points
- The story was used effectively with an able group of youngsters
- The students were still highly interested in the materials, and explored them, but at a very different level to the way that they would be explored by children with PMLD.
- The story served as an effective vehicle to promote discussion

Teacher's comments
"I feel there are lots of ways you can use this story to build in more content and allow for extension. You can stop for a moment and say, 'What would you do if you won the lottery? Would you buy a dog? What would the dog be like that you bought?' And extend the story for children who need that. So, by carefully deploying and preparing your staff, you can have this going on while others are still looking at the lottery ticket or the fur fabric. So there's a little bit of extension for those that need it and it just keeps them all ready and focused.

"The pupils in my class are among the most able in the school, and perhaps you wouldn't think of using Bag Books with them. But Bag Books are excellent for pulling groups back together and quickly getting them in the palm of your hand. With a bit of imagination, it can be a great tool for holding attention and promoting discussion."

5. Discussion
The analysis of the comments made by the 27 interviewees, and our observations of the storytelling sessions demonstrates that Bag Books, like other multi-sensory stories, make a contribution to the teaching, assessment, and enjoyment of learning of students with a wide range of special educational needs; and in particular, those with PMLD.

This contribution is not quantifiable due to the wide range of variables that exist with regard to their use: variables such as the type of school, the students, class size, teacher personality and storytelling style, the level of adherence to the 'script' or adaptation. The examples of storytelling sessions observed in this report demonstrate the wide variation in presentation that we saw even within

this small sample of schools. Nonetheless it is clear from our research that Bag Books are considered to be an important tool for making English and literacy – as well as a wide range of other curriculum topics – accessible and for bringing significant pleasure to a large number of students.

5.1 Bag Books outside the classroom

We had hoped to gather data about the use of Bag Books outside the classroom, but in all of the schools we visited we found that, though used regularly as a classroom tool, or in the case of one school within its residential facility as well, Bag Books were not shared with families. One teacher stated

> *"I think some parents would really benefit from those stories. It would be nice making some, you know, better relationship between them and the child, spending some quality time together. Sometimes I think parents struggle with that, with the quality time because of the disabilities and I think it would be quite a nice time spent together for both the child and the parent."*

Another spoke of how they had been successfully used at a school event with parents.

> *"We've worked twice with the storyteller but this was the first time we'd involved parents. So that was quite successful really…because I think a lot of our parents think that they've got children with special needs and they don't understand the book, they can't look the pictures so therefore they don't do it. But I try to say to them it's about a lot more than just reading a book really. It's about interacting, communicating, exploring…all the things that we do here, all day long."*

However, despite all of this, none of the schools visited shares their Bag Books with parents, due either to concerns about consistency of approach –

> *"We kind of get a bit precious really about things that we do in school going home, especially if people are working on specific targets, because quite often when things go home it's not done in exactly the same way and then that sort of has an impact on school."*

– or more frequently due to concerns about cost, damage or things going missing.

> *"We could I suppose loan them out, but then you'd probably get more damage. We're quite careful with them because we know how expensive they are, and how much of a good resource they are as well."*

> *"We don't do a lending library. If we did a lending library we'd have nothing. Because truthfully…I mean, we can advise parents where they can get them from; we'll try and find them links where maybe they can access these type*

of stories. If they can financially buy them we'll tell them - I mean we sent them leaflets with Bag Books. But for us we need to look after our students and our resources here and we find it difficult with books anyhow. If they go home to parents, there's no guarantee they would come back."

We spoke to staff from a library service for visually impaired children: they do not stock Bag Books, again due to concerns about cost and things going missing.

"We don't have any Bag Books to lend out. We tend to direct people straight to the websites or to schools and things because I don't think it would work well at a lending library because we get stuff come back routinely with bits missing and I think that would - the odds of getting even a single box back complete would be I think very wishful thinking."

It seems a pity to us that the families of the children we observed in these schools are not accessing Bag Books, and that they may not be sharing the enjoyment of sensory storytelling with their children. We are aware that Bag Books has produced one '*At Home'* story, designed for one-to-one use in the home, and we feel that this could be an avenue worth further investigation and development.

5.2. Consistency of approach

Although a training DVD and instructions about the use of Bag Books are available, few respondents had seen or heard of them. Most respondents had not received formal training regarding how to use the story packs, and often had learned how to use the materials by observing colleagues. As a result we saw wide variation regarding how stories were told, both between schools and within the same school.

"We did have some Bag Books training but it was some years ago now…and when we first purchased the first lot, they came along, spent an evening with us and it was excellent, excellent. But now, I don't know how many other staff have come in from different settings. I suppose it's kind of like storytelling itself, it's been passed on and passed on and people adapt to it or have their own version of how it should be… And equally you've got different children and so you try and use their interests within the stories as well."

 "I was in Sandra's class for a few years and we used them all the time and I just picked it up from her really…because it's not difficult, anyone can do it."

All Bag Books (with the exception of the 'at Home' story '*The Captain's Hat'*) are specifically designed for group storytelling. Stories are developed with this purpose in mind, and objects are generally included with a view to promoting turn-taking, waiting and developing attention. However, it was clear from the interviews and observations – as well as comments and suggestions regarding

extra objects and modes of presentation – that the stories are used in large groups, small groups and with individual students.

Furthermore, as was the case in the study undertaken by ten Brug *et al.* (2012), few of the storytelling sessions that we observed adhered strictly to the guidelines suggested in the training notes (Bag Books, 2011). Though these state, for example, that storytellers should not seek to embellish the storyline (p10) we witnessed a lot of variation in how stories were interpreted and individualised and how the materials were used.

> *"I'm not supervising, saying everyone's got to do it this way. It's open to them to interpret the story and interact with the child using the objects from the Bag. And I think that's important…to allow that degree of independence to the adults, how they're going to lead the story with the child. Because I think if you're very prescriptive it can dull something down and that's why you've got to allow that flexibility with people."*

Many factors may be impacting upon the level of individualisation and variation which we saw. As is identified above (4.3) teachers were in some cases teaching students with a broad range of needs and conditions. Few teachers had received formal training in the Bag Books approach, instead learning from others or simply using the materials. The phenomenon of 'therapist drift' (Jordan and Powell, 1996) may also be impacting: Jordan and Powell identified that there is a drift from following guidelines towards more naturalistic interaction, and that this is more pronounced when individuals have had less training or when the methods imposes ways of interacting that do not come naturally to the teacher.

This raises interesting questions about whether storytellers who deviate from the guidelines and script are telling the story 'incorrectly' or are differentiating the tools to meet the child's learning style, or adult's teaching style; and about the extent to which Bag Books (the charity) wish to support purchasers using Bag books (the stories and materials) in ways that do not adhere to their storytelling guidelines. Teachers may well seek to recycle and re-use preferred materials for multiple functions (e.g. sensory exploration as well as storytelling). We noted that children seemed to enjoy the materials regardless of how they were presented as long as the adults were enjoying themselves too.

> *"You do need to be someone that is really into it and really does enjoy doing it, otherwise you could just sit there reading it, reading to them. You need to go with it and make it a story."*

The least successful storytelling session that we observed adhered tightly to the script, but was told in a stilted manner, with little enthusiasm – and failed to really engage with the students. They were much more engaged after the story had finished, when the storyteller and a colleague explored the objects with the students one-to-one. This activity seemed much more attuned to the adults'

natural interactive style, was much slower-paced, and the students were quickly and fully immersed in the activity.

5.3. Information

A number of comments made by respondents related to earlier products, or earlier versions of products. Some of the comments betray a lack of knowledge about exactly what services are available. For example, the respondent who said that it would be good for Bag Books to do a 'classics' series was unaware that a version of '*Aladdin*' was currently available. Some respondents spoke that they would like a replacement service when parts are broken or missing: the charity actually does provide such a service, charging only the cost price for replacement parts. The charity also provides replacement boxes. These and other comments showed that there is a degree of ignorance or misinformation about what is available. This indicates that it may be worth revisiting their information and publicity strategy, and how they share information with both potential purchasers and current product users.

5.4. Further research and investigation

Although we observed some sessions (e.g. the one outlined in Example 3) where Bag Books stories were used with children on the autism spectrum, with ADHD or behavioural issues, this study focused primarily on the use of Bag Books with students of school age with PMLD. Further research would be worthwhile, for example with regard to their use with students with other special educational needs, and with adults with PMLD and other needs. There are increasing numbers of elderly people living with learning disabilities, including PMLD; and multisensory approaches, are also in use with, for example, individuals with dementia (Milev *et al.,* 2008). It may therefore be worth considering the development of stories related to later stages in life, as well as investigating if Bag Books approaches could be appropriate and helpful across a wider range of conditions.

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Appendix 1   The P Scales

The P-Scales are a set of performance scales designed to be used to identify of students with special educational needs who are working at a level below Level 1 of the National Curriculum. The Department for Education has published both a set of level descriptors (QCA, 2009) and guide to their use (QCDA, 2011).

The descriptors are the consistent across P1 to P3 (QCA, 2009), and are as follows:

P1 (i)   Pupils encounter activities and experiences. They may be passive or resistant. They may show simple reflex responses. Any participation is fully prompted.

P1 (ii)   Pupils show emerging awareness of activities and experiences. They may have periods when they appear alert and ready to focus their attention on certain people, events, objects or parts of objects. They may give intermittent reactions.

P2 (i)   Pupils begin to respond consistently to familiar people, events and objects. They react to new activities and experiences. They begin to show interest in people, events and objects. They accept and engage in coactive exploration.

P2 (ii)   Pupils begin to be proactive in their interactions. They communicate consistent preferences and affective responses. They recognise familiar people, events and objects. They perform actions, often by trial and improvement, and they remember learned responses over short periods of time. They cooperate with shared exploration and supported participation.

P3 (i)   Pupils begin to communicate intentionally. They seek attention through eye contact, gesture or action. They request events or activities. They participate in shared activities with less support. They explore materials in increasingly complex ways. They observe the results of their own actions with interest. They remember learned responses over more extended periods.

P3 (ii)   Pupils use emerging conventional communication. They greet known people and may initiate interactions and activities. They can remember learned responses over increasing periods of time and may anticipate known events. They may respond to options or choices with actions or gestures. They actively explore objects and events for more extended periods. They apply potential solutions systematically to problems.

Beyond P3, the descriptors are more differentiated according to the subject.