

USING STORIES FOR BELONGING

A Story Project Conference

16th April 2026

With the support of SHINE, we held our first conference with education leaders and partners in Bradford. This document provides an overview of the event.

Our aim: to celebrate our work in Bradford and to explore the theme of belonging through stories

Sharing Impact

Olivia shared the impact of our work in Bradford, including stats and data from schools. She explored some of the key findings of her recently completed PhD.

Feedback from staff training was also shared.

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Expert Speakers

Marcia Hutchinson, MBE, read an extract from her book *The Mercy Step* which described her experience of visiting the theatre for the first time. It struck a chord with the group and reminded us of the importance of understanding children's vulnerabilities and access to educational experiences. Marcia spoke passionately about the difference her teachers made to her life.

The group discussed **'how do you make sure Story Project classrooms reflect and value the diversity of children's lives and experiences?'**

Richard O'Neill, MBE, spoke about the importance of authentic representation in stories. Citing an example from a local Bradford school, he explored the idea of reflecting the children of the city. Richard also delved into the idea of stories as a bridge, how they can be used to connect children to other ways of life and other people.

The group discussed **'how can we all build belonging for children who are often underrepresented in stories?'**

Story Bridge Resource

A free assembly resource was created and shared at the conference, supporting schools to further embed a sense of belonging using stories. The resource is now available in the membership area.



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School Voices Advice

Colleagues from three primary schools shared their experiences and advice. Here is a summary of their top tips!

How do you create a sense of belonging for all children?

- Praising effort rather than outcome
- Paired or small groups with carefully chosen partners
- Involving families where appropriate
- No-pressure environment, with no right or wrong answers
- Keeping sessions discussion-based and allowing children to point to emotions on their grids
- Allowing time for children to speak to an adult as part of the lesson
- Teaching TSP in a regular slot in the timetable
- Pairing children with a close friend and other ways to encourage sharing such as Think Pair Share
- Gradually scaffolding contributions, starting with pair talk before the class discussion to allow quieter children to contribute
- Explicit modelling of classroom culture; active listening, turn-taking, valuing every voice
- If one particular child is feeling unsure in TSP lessons, make time to listen to their concerns and reassure them that their contributions are valued. Adapt the approach to suit their needs, e.g. by breaking tasks down, providing clearer instructions, visual supports etc

How did you overcome any initial challenges?

- Focussing on using just one PSHE programme to relieve timetable pressure
- The class teacher teaches TSP every week, rather than a cover teacher or TA, so it was familiar and structured and a safe space for discussion
- Establishing clear discussion rules and modelling respectful listening helped children understand the importance of safe spaces to talk
- Whole class discussions don't always work for all classes, so using group discussions can support better engagement
- Understanding the underlying reasons why some children don't feel they belong can be hard, especially if it stems from a past experience. Time, careful observation and regular communication supports this
- Really 'knowing the children' and thinking about how they might interpret a text including possible triggering content

Some schools have experienced challenges with using diverse texts, especially those including LGBT characters due to parent concerns. How have you ensured parents are on board with all Story Project texts?

- Send out a curriculum overview at the beginning of the year
- Have an open and transparent policy
- Encourage parents to speak to SLT if they have an issue
- Consider the impact of not using the texts about LGBTQ families within the community
- Emphasise the need for respect, understanding and belonging



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How do you know your approach is making a difference?

- Shift in emotional literacy, with key markers including children speaking more freely about their feelings and using a range of regulation strategies
- Behaviour incidents and logs show a decrease in incidents linked to emotional frustration
- Children are more able to articulate connections between stories and their own lives, showing genuine understanding of the story, themselves and others
- Pupil voice is showing specific reference to books and characters
- Increased enthusiasm for reading
- Increase in verbal contributions and ability to explain why other people might feel certain ways
- More in-depth, nuanced, thoughtful discussions compared to before starting TSP

What is one high-impact thing schools could do to strengthen belonging in TSP lessons?

- Use the emotional vocabulary grids to reinforce and scaffold the discussion of emotions, providing a laminated copy to every child
- Use your autonomy to make tweaks to suit your class
- Start each lesson with a belonging-focussed check in linked to the story, e.g. 'which character do you most feel like today?'

Stories From Our Schools

Schools shared some inspirational stories of direct impact on their children, including:

- After exploring the story 'Grandad's Camper', a young boy felt confident to share photos of his same-sex parents' wedding. This was something he hadn't felt able to do previously.
- Two boys who had previously not seen eye-to-eye, actively showed empathy towards each other when one got hurt during a football game, a direct impact of empathy discussions during TSP lessons.
- After reading 'The Proudest Blue', two young girls felt confident to wear a hijab for the first time in school. They were met with respect and understanding from their classmates.

Feedback From The Conference

Thank you to everyone who attended.

100%
felt highly
motivated and inspired

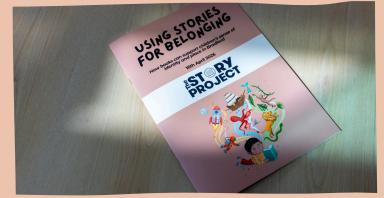
"An excellent session"

"Truly special"

"What an inspirational afternoon"

100%
felt the afternoon
was valuable

"The programme is absolutely
revolutionary for supporting
wellbeing and fostering belonging"



Have a great idea for improving belonging in TSP classrooms?

Get in touch info@story-project.co.uk