



Stories for Special Teenagers

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Thelma Davey is the teacher librarian in a special school. Recently she conducted a survey of staff and pupils about the kind of books they believed were important to them and needed in the school library. Her teacher colleagues voted for more non-fiction; the children wanted more fiction. Here she assesses the value of fiction for her class of young people with special educational needs.

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With her own class of fifteen 13-14 year olds Thelma decided to embark on a simple investigation of the value of fiction for older children with special needs. From a special school library service loan of picture books and story books which were added to the library the children, with Thelma, chose four or five books each week. By majority vote one of these would be read aloud. The children in Thelma's class have difficulties which are physical, mental or emotional, sometimes all three. They are unable to articulate clearly their problems and needs. For many the task of learning to read is an enormous hurdle to be overcome.

This is Thelma's account of what happened.

I was in the library dealing with the books on special loan which had just arrived; a group of eight children from my class *were* helping. Despite what is sometimes said about poor readers not being interested in books, this group were obviously enjoying sorting and helping to categorise the new books.

We were chatting and I casually mentioned my idea of choosing a book a week to read to them. I was promptly handed **A Taste of Blackberries** by Doris Buchanan Smith (Heinemann, 0 434 93015 6, £6.95) and told 'This is a nice one, read this one to us.' I did not know the book and asked, 'Why that one?' They said it had a nice picture on the front. Playing for time I said we'd probably be able to read it later; but after break the book was thrust at me again and I was pressed to read it. Clearly the credibility of my project was in danger so, cursing myself for casual remarks, I decided there was nothing for it but to break all the rules and start reading a book I had no knowledge of.

It soon became clear that the book was nothing like its title implied or like the attractive front cover. It was on a theme not usually discussed - death - and what is more the death of a child. I pointed out that this was going to be a sad story and perhaps they would like another. But it was clear their interest had been captured; I was told, 'Go on, it's good.'

The bell rang at the end of the afternoon and a chorus of children cried out, 'Go on, don't stop.,

Next morning the first three children to come to class asked in quick succession, 'You going to finish that story, Miss?'

Later that afternoon the story was read to its conclusion and it was met with silence. I remarked, 'There, I told you it was going to be very sad,' but Shiree replied, 'I like to read that myself - can I read that?' meaning

'Is my reading ability good enough for me to read the book on my own?' She took the book home to read that night.

The book is written in the first person throughout, it tells of the accidental death of Jamie who, unknown to everyone, was allergic to bees and dies suddenly as a result of bee stings. The story tells us of Jamie's best friend's reaction to all that happened. It is a difficult subject but is dealt with with a sensitivity and perception which the listeners appeared to appreciate. It made it easier for me to emphasise that the death of a young person, particularly a child, is unusual and happens on occasions as a result of an accident or serious illness. We discussed the various aspects of death and they told me of grans and grandpas who had died. One child made the remark that she particularly liked the part of the story when the friend described 'the happy times they had shared together'. Alan, the first of the three to arrive that morning, remained silent but had listened intently. He is still suffering from the loss of his father two years ago.

This was not a topic I would have chosen to read so early in the term to the class and with so little preparation. Later that week another member of the group lost his father tragically in a road accident. The shared experience of the story made it easier to talk to the class and to ask them to show extra care and understanding towards their class-mate in the days ahead.

The book has since been read by several of the children. Some of the children are labelled educationally sub-normal but in reality they have an awareness and an experience of life which is far beyond their years and mentality and they had displayed this during the discussion.

During the first week proper of the 'experiment' the shortlist we chose together was:

Dogger, Shirley Hughes, Bodley Head, 0 370 30006 8, £5.50; Fontana Picture Lions, 0 00 661464 7, £1.50 pbk

My New Mum and Me, Betty Wright, Basil Blackwell, 0 86256 008 X, £4.95

I Can't Always Hear You, Betty Wright, Basil Blackwell, 0 86256 009 8, £4.95

Green-eyed Ghost Cat, Michael Grater, Piccadilly Press, 0 946826 60 9, £4.50

By a majority vote the class chose **I Can't Always Hear You** for reading aloud. They named children at school they know as being partially deaf and wearing hearing aids. The book has lots of illustrations. It is American in origin. Kim, the central character, is Chinese; the teacher is Black and it is a multi-racial class. The print is not over-large (120 words per page) and I felt the level was about right for most of the class.

Before beginning the story we began by putting our fingers in our ears and imagining what it was like to be deaf. We then removed them and listened to the sounds around us. The windows were open and we could hear the shouts from the football field, a younger child calling from the sandpit and Margaret talked about the rustling of the trees around the school.

The story tells us of Kim and the problems she encounters in an ordinary school; previously she had attended a school for the deaf. Kim wears a hearing aid but despite this she makes blunders and is made to feel foolish because she misunderstands instructions. Despite being a good runner, excellent at drawing and the best in Maths, she becomes unhappy and feels conspicuous because of her handicap. She asks to see the head-teacher as she wishes to leave the school. During the interview the head reveals her hearing aid, at which point Madhur in class remarked aloud, 'O my God, the teacher she got one too.' The group had listened intently and were obviously sad when the story came to its understanding conclusion. I was surprised at the eager responses to my questions. We talked about children we know at our own school who wear hearing aids, of parents and friends with this handicap. I told them of my visit to a deaf school and how its quiet atmosphere was so unlike the hurly-burly of our own school. Then of my own father who was profoundly deaf. One talked of his mum who could not hear properly.

I then asked them if, like Kim in the story, they ever felt they were different in some ways from others. Their quick replies were both revealing and enlightening. Susan felt different because she attended a Special School and several agreed this was so. Alan said he was different because he had no Dad and John, whose father had died earlier that week, said quietly, 'I got no Dad now.' Another child pointed out that John visited the toilet frequently - his problem of incontinence is something he is trying hard to overcome. Matthew told us he did not *live* with his family but with foster parents. Evelyn said she lived with an aunt and very bluntly that her Mum did not want her. Christopher said he could not spell. Madhur, a very lively hyperactive and colourful 13-year-old, said 'I chat too much!' Jane hated wearing her glasses. Michael on one of his rare days at school said, 'I hate school'. I then told them how I had always been teased about being short and how I wanted to be tall and fair; the lesson came to an end amidst some laughter. The discussion continued at different times for many days.

The next week **Little Dog Lost** by Nina Warner Hooke (Puffin, 0 14 03.1738 4, £1.25) was chosen in front of:

The Magic Finger, Roald Dahl, Young Puffin, 0 14 03.0704 4, £1.25

The October Animal, Denise Hill, Hamish Hamilton Gazelle, 0 241 11252 4, £2.50

How Mole Nearly Won a Lottery, Kurt Bracharz, Macmillan, 0 333 33984 3, £1.95

It's a lengthy story but the appealing front cover picture of a little black and white mongrel puppy influenced its choice. I was also told, 'You will like it too'. (Every Friday afternoon we have clubs - I usually run the pets' club - hence the remark.)

Pepito is a bright-eyed, cheerful little dog, with ears too big for his head and a funny short tail. He lives in an old soap-powder box amidst the hubbub of a Spanish fruit market - until the rubbish collectors come to clean up the square. He is eventually dumped at the bottom of a disused quarry, miles outside the town and, abandoned and alone, his adventures begin. His search for a loving home has a happy ending.

The story was read at intervals over the next two weeks (with some editing by me) and it held their interest despite its length. The book was kept on the mantelpiece in the classroom and handed to me at every opportunity.

Normally our children recognise only their immediate surrounding but as this story was set in Spain it was an opportunity to find this place on a map; one child had recently been on holiday to Spain. Most of the children appear to have had a pet of some kind.

They were able to write their own stories entitled 'My Pet' and we discussed the meaning of the 'hard' words and phrases - quarantine, alibi, smuggled, deputation to the Major, etc. They were also encouraged to find other animal stories in the library to read themselves.

Our next choice involved two books from the following shortlist:

A Thousand Yards at Sea, Adele Geras, Hodder & Stoughton, o/p

The Children Next Door, Margery Sharp, Heinemann, 0 434 95878 6, o/p

Helpers, Shirley Hughes, Bodley Head, 0 370 10756 X, £5.50

Grasshopper and Butterfly, Helen Piers, Viking Kestrel, o/p

Arthur's Funny Birthday, Sophie Davis, Hodder & Stoughton, o/p

The vote for **The Children Next Door** was almost unanimous but one small voice insisted on **Helpers**. Christopher is the least able child within the group. The children are encouraged to help him in most tasks whenever possible and although some of them declared very loudly that the book was 'too easy', when I continued to hold it up alongside the

next popular choice, they finally agreed to it being read first. The book was quick and easy to read and I believe more of them enjoyed it than would admit to it. They agreed the illustrations were amusing and some joined in by reading aloud the single sentence or caption.

The group were then eager to begin **The Children Next Door** and it was obvious that they were attracted to the front page with its high-rise dwellings and the three pencilled drawings of two teenagers and a small lad. Shiree thought the name of the story sounded good and, 'I want know what they like next door - I think that be good.'

I read the preface explaining that the setting took place chiefly in the city of London. We discovered that over half the class had either been born in, lived in or had visited the big city and were therefore familiar with its busy overcrowded streets. Susan commented that 'it's got nice writing inside and you can read it' when asked to give their reasons as to why they had chosen that particular book. Matthew also remarked, 'it's not a baby book, is it?'

The group listened well and were intrigued with the unexpected twist to the plot. The three main characters were lonely, having lived previously in a small friendly village. They were overawed by life in this large, and to them seemingly friendless, capital city. They invented three imaginary friends and the problems this caused obviously amused my listeners. Eventually the story tells us that two teenagers arrive to live in the flat below and they no longer have to lie to the adults about their imaginary friends. The tale has a happy ending when the two families unite and return to live in the village in the country.

The reaction of the group to this story provoked a great deal of discussion about their own neighbourhood and for many of them the lack of friends. Many of the children travel a fair distance to school each day and it appears that their friendships are formed in the coach or at school. In keeping with an all-age-range school, it is not unusual for them to have friends much younger or older than themselves. Few of them have friends near home or among the children attending their local neighbourhood schools. Two of the group live in flats within the city and obviously related to the children in the story.

The group were reluctant at first to discuss the invention of imaginary friends and so I told them of my own child and her imaginary friend and the problems this caused me as a mother. They laughed and then visibly relaxed. Susan, an only child, said quietly, 'I had a rabbit as my friend.' I asked if she meant a real pet rabbit and she replied, 'No, I pretended; he could stand up and he wore a green hat and talked to me. His name was Poppins, is that daft? It was my best friend.'

The group were reassured that many children had 'made up' or pretend friends at some time or other and then both Jane and John admitted to having such companions when they were much younger. Madhur, always very forthright, said 'Susan, why you have a friend like that?' We talked of people wanting a special friend, usually to chat and confide their problems and secrets. The children concluded it had been a good story and one they had all enjoyed.

With Shiree, Madhur and Evelyn in our group, I felt it was time to look at stories of children from other countries, in particular Pakistan, India and Jamaica. The class quickly understood the reason for this request. Their choice for the next week included:

Sunshine Island Moonshine Baby, Clare Cherrington, Collins, 0 00 184776 7, £4.95; Fontana Lions, 0 00 672560 0, £1.25 pbk

Jafta - The Wedding, Hugh Lewin, Bell & Hyman/Evans, 0 237 45546 3, £3.50; Dinosaur, 0 85122 398 2, 95p pbk

Feelings, Richard Allington & Kathleen Krull, Basil Blackwell, o/p

Tariq Learns to Swim, Hassina Khan, Bodley Head, 0 370 30530 2, £5.25

We decided to read **Tariq Learns to Swim** first. Shiree with her poor reading ability and limited English vocabulary was delighted by the short text and authentic illustrations of this book and Margaret remarked that Shiree 'liked a book

for herself'.

Evelyn, an able reader, preferred to read **Sunshine Island Moonshine Baby** on her own but was prepared to talk later of the members of her family still living in Jamaica.

Having pleased me by choosing a 'multi-cultural book', the children then proceeded to please themselves. The popular choice was **Gumdrop and the Secret Switches** by Val Biro (Hodder & Stoughton, 0 340 26276 1, £4.50). They enjoyed the adventures of this old car (some said it was like the car in the film **Chitty Chitty Bang Bang**); they loved the humour and the colourful cartoon-like illustrations. The style is simple with clearly-drawn characters. The children's verdict: 'a funny book'. I then had to read thirteen other titles in the series.

The choice of books for the last week shows clearly the wide ability range within the group:

Burglar Bill Janet and Allan Ahlberg, Heinemann, 0 434 92500 4, £4.95; Fontana Picture Lions, 0 00 661486 8, £1.50 pbk

Bertie and the Big Red Ball, Beryl Cook and Edward Lucie-Smith, John Murray, 0 7195 3976 5, £5.95

A Friend Can Help, John Berger, Macdonald Raintree, o/p

The Steel Band, Wendy Green, Hamish Hamilton Antelope, 0 241 10777 6, £3.25; Beaver, 0 600 20723 4, 85p pbk

A Bit of Give and Take, Bernard Ashley, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 11301 6, £3.25; Corgi, 0 552 52348 8, £1.50 pbk

Burglar Bill appealed to us all. I was asked to read it again the next day. On both occasions the reactions were spontaneous delight. The colourful, amusing pictures and clear repetitive text had great appeal. The theme of good triumphing over evil never fails to be popular and satisfying.

What did I learn from the experiment?

On evidence of the response of my class the children were right about their need for more fiction. The time spent sharing stories seemed to release them from the limitations of their vocabulary, and from their inability to express their feelings and their needs with clarity, more effectively than anything else we have done together. Picture and storybooks promoted conversation and animation even among those with the most severe speech and vocabulary difficulties. The imaginative content, the language, the pictures met their needs in this area more directly than the curriculum-based information books. Perhaps because they were involved in the choosing and because of the particular atmosphere reading aloud and talking about stories creates, they were less inhibited and were stimulated to use their own words. I did the reading aloud but from the illustrations - drawings, photographs, cartoons - they were able to follow the sequence and could re-tell the story in their own sentences. Visual literacy developed as they made the pictures function as language. Some re-read for themselves or together.

Many of my class will, we hope, enter the world of work in some way. For them writing is a difficult and laborious task; for their own personal survival they must be as confident and as able orally as we can make them. Here they were confident about their relationship with the books and with the fact that they had something to say. They also listened to each other with interest and respect. It was clear too that some of the stories touched many of the children deeply and that many experienced the particular pleasure of being 'lost' in a book - something of importance to offer to those who after school will find no employment and face boredom and frustration.

I am aware that I am not the first to come to these conclusions. I read Dorothy Butler's account of the part played by books in the life of multiply-handicapped Cushla, and felt that what she showed must be true for *all* children with special educational needs. But with the insistent pressures and many demands of the teaching day it's easy to go on doing what some might consider more important or more orthodox things. Without the requirement to do something for a course I might never have got round to it. I'm glad I did. Perhaps we all have to 'reinvent the wheel' for ourselves

before we see its potential. If you haven't, I urge you to experiment for yourselves.

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