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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Describing the impact of an accessible literacy programme for children with profound and multiple learning difficulties on teaching staff

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Abstract

There is growing recognition of the visual learning needs of children with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD). Dedicated training in visual impairment is lacking in teaching curricula. A literacy programme designed for PMLD children has been demonstrated to show benefits for this group of learners. The aim of this study was to understand the impact of the programme on teachers' confidence, understanding and practice when delivering visual learning for children with complex needs. An interview-based qualitative study was undertaken with educators who have experience with the literacy programme. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The results demonstrated that teachers themselves experience joy at the impact they are observing in pupils; they describe a deeper understanding of the visual needs of individuals and how to adapt the environment to extend this beyond the duration of the show. Programme users also express an improvement in confidence in how to produce accessible and inclusive materials and the courage to share this with peers to widen the knowledge base. An accessible literacy programme can demonstrate broader benefits beyond being a teaching tool—it may model inclusive techniques that educators adopt beyond the show. We have demonstrated how it fosters inclusive, affective engagement and promotes professional agency, inclusive pedagogy and observational learning for teachers. For professionals working with students with complex needs, feeling acknowledged and resourced matters.

KEYWORDS
affective pedagogy, inclusive education, PMLD, sensory storytelling, teacher voice

Key Points

- The show is more than a teaching tool—it models inclusive techniques that educators adopt beyond the show.
- Teachers describe making significant adaptations to the physical learning environment as a result of the programme, reflecting a deeper understanding of how the visual environment impacts children with visual impairments.
- The show offers opportunities to observe and understand each learner's unique ways of engaging.
- For professionals working with students with complex needs, feeling acknowledged and resourced matters. The show serves as a source of morale, ideas and validation.

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INTRODUCTION

Profound and multiple learning disability (PMLD) is a term used to describe children with a global developmental delay likely to display severe or profound cognitive impairment, with difficulties in controlling movement, processing sensory information, communicating and interacting socially (Kamenopoulou et al., 2021). While this terminology is common in UK health and education contexts, international literature may refer to comparable populations using terms such as profound intellectual and multiple disabilities (PIMD) or severe/profound developmental disabilities.

There is a growing body of evidence describing the under-recognition of visual impairment (VI) in those with PMLD. VI is a broad term which encompasses a range of visual dysfunction and extends beyond visual acuity (sharpness of letters on a chart) to include visual field, visual attention, visual perception, visuo-motor skills and visual memory. Where a dysfunction in neurological development or structure is associated with atypical visual behaviours and function, we term this cerebral visual impairment (CVI). CVI is the most common cause of VI in developed countries, yet the literature relating to educating a child with both PMLD and VI is sparse. A review identified that the majority of published research relates to educational challenges faced by children with a VI in isolation rather than combined with complex needs (Kamenopoulou et al., 2021). The authors concluded that research on strategies in settings which promote inclusion was a priority in this field.

The British Childhood Visual Impairment Survey documented that half of all children in the UK with VI have additional needs (Teoh et al., 2021). Rates of VI in those with PMLD are reported between 33% and 92% (Donaldson et al., 2019; Musleh et al., 2024; Pilling & Outhwaite, 2016; Van Den Broek et al., 2006). The potential influence of VI on a child's ability to engage with education can be neglected among those children with a wide range of needs (McLinden et al., 2017). This then results in an increased dependency on educators to take this into consideration when structuring learning (McLinden & McCall, 2010).

McLinden et al. (2016) describe the teacher's role as facilitating a 'dual model of access': firstly, ensuring that the child's environment is adapted to enable them to learn (i.e., access to learning), and secondly, supporting the child to develop skills which promote independent learning (i.e., learning to access). In order to participate effectively in education, it is essential that a classroom teacher can identify and remove barriers to access for learners with visual and other impairments.

There is a distinction to be made between ocular (i.e., relating to eye disease) and cerebral (i.e., relating to neurological dysfunction) VI. The mainstay of management of CVI is in developing strategies to enable children to use their vision more effectively through adaptations to their environment and visual tasks they are required to perform in daily life (Fazzi et al., 2021; Pilling & Ravenscroft, 2022). Training in education techniques which support a child with CVI has been shown to lead to an increase in looking behaviours in students and more appropriate selection of activities and resources (Wall Emerson et al., 2024).

The Cerebral Visual Impairment Learning Awareness for School Staff (CLASS) study (Jayasinghe et al., 2025) reported inconsistent use of CVI-supportive practices. The authors suggest that the provision of short 'bite-size' learning episodes has the potential for both raising awareness and encouraging the uptake of teaching practices for this group of children. The study concludes that widening the audience exposed to these practices, including families and caregivers, is the next step towards a more inclusive understanding of CVI for educators, both in school and at home.

There are several examples within the literature of adaptations to support learning in CVI. Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) tool (Campbell et al., 2022) takes the form of checklists and prompts designed to be used by the team at school to help ensure the child's needs are accommodated and enable learning to be accessible.

McDowell and Budd (2018) explored the perspectives of teachers and paraeducators on the impact of classroom clutter on learning in CVI. Participants noted improvements in attention and focus for both students and their own functioning in a decluttered environment, in particular with the use of a black background.

The positive impact of colour and motion in eliciting and maintaining visual attention has been studied. The authors concluded that these modalities increase motivation and promote visual learning among a cohort of children with CVI (Cohen-Maitre & Haerich, 2005).

A novel learning development package is available, which draws all the above elements together and offers schools a suite of resources to deliver a literacy curriculum to children with complex needs and CVI (Marvin Story Time Show, n.d.). It includes craft activities, tactile learning and a 45-minute storytelling activity, delivered typically via an online video stream. The package is underpinned by learning theory and development of visual skills (see Table 1).

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TABLE 1 Outline of accessible literacy programme 'Story Time Show'.

Programme structure	Literacy access and visual skill-building opportunities
Welcome: Large red, gold and yellow pompoms High-energy voice Catch phrase: Whoopeedeedoo introduced	Build anticipation, engagement Visual attention/fixation Repetition, copying actions
Name calls: Storyteller introduces herself My name is Gwynnie-Gwyn-Gwyn (repeated two or three times) Rhythmic movement of red gloves with large yellow pompoms Children/young people/classes name calls Call and answer, 'We think you're incredible, We think you're amazing'	Visual attention, fixation—looking at storyteller's high-contrast face Build anticipation, engagement Red gloves increase engagement, visual attention, fixation, repetition and high-energy voice sustains engagement
Rainbow spinning: (Figure 1) Large garden rainbow windmill The storyteller builds anticipation by counting down to the rainbow spinning. Uses high-energy voice and 'whee' to engage	Visual awareness, attention and fixation. The high-energy voice used helps to engage and cues where to look to increase visual attention and participation
Meet Marvin: (Figure 2) Crocheted puppet doll used with high-contrast face and high-contrast plain jumper Chat with Marvin Marvin says hello and waves to the children	Supports social communication skills, waving, saying hello, smiling, kindness and love High-contrast face of puppet encourages visual attention and engagement
Story narrated: (Figure 3) Story is always introduced by singing theme song Using large (>75 cm) brightly coloured 2D characters, block colour, simple outline High energy, repetition, song, set on a black background. One voice, one person, no background music or additional sounds	Visual attention Fixation Vocalization/Copying actions, rhythms, words and sounds Clapping, tapping along Repetition, anticipation
Goodbye song with Marvin	Build anticipation, engagement Visual attention/fixation Repetition, copying actions
Rainbow spins	Visual awareness, attention and fixation The high-energy voice used helps to engage and cues where to look to increase visual attention and participation
Goodbye from Gwynnie-Gwyn-Gwyn with cheerleader pompoms	Red gloves increase engagement, visual attention, fixation, repetition and high-energy voice sustains engagement

FIGURE 1 Storyteller wearing a high-contrast hat, spinning a rainbow spinner.

The adjustments to teaching resources showcased in the package reflect contemporary practice and understanding of how to make teaching accessible to a PMLD child with CVI—bold colours, plain dark background, exaggerated facial characteristics, presenting single objects and allowing time to respond are all established practices in this field (Harwood, n.d.) (Figures 1–3).

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FIGURE 2 Storyteller with bright high-contrast hat holding Marvin crochet doll, the main character of each story, presented against a black background.

FIGURE 3 Storyteller holding two large, bright, high-contrast characters against a black background.

The aim of this study was to explore the impact of this remote-delivered accessible literacy programme on teaching staff in terms of their self-perceived increase in knowledge, confidence and understanding of literacy provision for children with PMLD and VI. Specifically, it aims to understand:

- What impact has the accessible literacy programme had on the individual?
- What (if any) changes to practice have the individual made as a result of observing changes in visual behaviour of children while watching an accessible literacy programme?
- What (if any) are the downsides of using an accessible literacy programme in a PMLD setting?

METHOD

We undertook a qualitative study, gathering data from semi-structured interviews conducted online, facilitated by the researcher. The interview schedule is shown in Appendix A. Information regarding the research project was included in a newsletter shared with individual teachers involved in delivering regular in-school accessible literacy programme sessions. Those declaring an interest were provided with more detailed information and invited to participate in the research. Inclusion criteria were individuals who had been using the accessible literacy programme with a cohort of PMLD children for a minimum of one term in the past 12 months, working within a special school in the UK. Informed consent was obtained. The study was approved by the University of Bradford Humanities, Social and Health Sciences Research Ethics Panel (E1250).

Interviews were recorded and digitally transcribed; identifiable data were then removed, and anonymized transcripts were saved separately to the video media.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved six iterative phases. Transcripts were reviewed through repeated reading and note-taking to develop early impressions. Segments of data relevant to the research question were systematically identified and manually coded. Codes were next collated into potential themes, and these themes were reviewed and named to reflect their core concept.

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RESULTS

Participants were recruited from seven schools across the UK. All teachers worked with children with PMLD; none had formal VI teaching qualifications. The age range of children they taught was 5–14 years. Interviews lasted between 32 and 53 min. Recruitment and data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached (i.e., when no new themes, insights or patterns emerged from the interviews).

We describe the six identified themes below.

Cultivating joy and enthusiasm

A prominent theme across all interviews is the pervasive sense of joy and enthusiasm that the accessible literacy programme instils, not only in the children but also in the teachers themselves. The 'infectious' presentation style has encouraged teachers to be more comfortable with 'being silly' and using varied vocal tones and musicality to engage pupils. The 'uplifting' and 'expressive' nature of the show encourages teachers to be more dynamic and participatory, creating a reciprocal loop where their joy enhances the children's engagement. This emotional uplift directly counteracts the demanding nature of teaching children with complex needs, making the job feel more rewarding and fun.

Supporting quotes:

- *'It is joyous and it's just really enthused'.*
- *'You also see how excited or the animation on the students' faces … So thrilling to see them responding like that'.*
- *'Their [the staff] faces light up at the same time when the students do'.*
- *'It's brilliant and it's definitely the voice … the response … when she started to talk was so cool'.*

Optimizing the learning environment

Teachers describe significant adaptations to the physical learning environment influenced by Marvin's Story Time Show (MSTS). A key takeaway is the emphasis on reducing visual clutter and enhancing contrast. Several participants described rearranging the classroom to ensure a plain, dark background behind them when teaching, replicating the show's visual clarity and improving the distinction of items. These adjustments reflect a deeper understanding of how the visual environment impacts children with VIs, ensuring that stimuli are clear and focused.

Supporting quotes:

- *'We are trying to create a darker corner … I've definitely changed the background colours that I've used'.*
- *'We're using the black aprons when we were doing stories as well'.*
- *'Even just the need for torches … that really takes a student's attention'.*
- *'Watch how they respond to different parts … sit them in different positions'.*

Refining teaching practices and resource preparation

Marvin's Story Time Show has significantly influenced pedagogical approaches and resource creation. Teachers are adopting strategies observed in the show, such as:

- Simplifying content: consciously 'stripped back' stories to two key characters and objects to hone visual attention, recognizing that 'less is more'.
- Embracing repetition and rhythm: emphasizing using more repetition and incorporating musical sounds and rhythm into storytelling, drawing directly from the show's structure.
- Building teacher confidence in resource preparation: A shift towards using 'more visual props' that directly tell the story, rather than solely sensory items, ensuring the narrative flow is maintained.
- Strategic use of screens: While the show is screen-based, consciously reducing overall screen time outside of Marvin's Story Time to prevent over-reliance and encourage transfer of skills to other contexts.

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Supporting quotes:

- *'Reducing down how many things you're presenting … giving them that extra time to respond'.*
- *'It resets expectations of what a child with complex needs might be able to access'.*
- *'We were doing really well on visual techniques … I want to put that back next year'.*

Enhancing attention and engagement in complex learners

A core benefit highlighted is the show's ability to capture and sustain the attention of children who typically struggle with literacy activities. The structured routines, visual clarity (bright objects on dark backgrounds) and engaging delivery effectively draw pupils in. This improved attention has direct implications for assessment, as teachers use the show as a valuable opportunity to observe children's reactions, track their visual skills and understand their individual needs. It serves as an 'assessment tool' for vision, awareness, anticipation and perseverance, allowing teachers to create 'virtual visual profiles' for their students.

Supporting quotes:

- *'The quality of the time and the quality of the observations I'm able to do'*
- *'It's really nice to have the opportunity … to absorb and just get purely to observe their reactions'*
- *'Marvin helps me understand what this child will need'*
- *'What does this child need? … I'm able to put together almost like a virtual visual profile for the children because I know that, OK, this child likes this. This child will need this verbal cue. This child will only look at the screen from this side'.*

Professional empowerment, development and confidence

The show promotes collaboration and informal professional development among staff. Teachers share observations and tips, discuss how to integrate the show's techniques into their daily practice and collectively work on creating resources. The show not only benefits students but also validates and energizes staff. Teachers feel seen, supported and inspired in a way that mainstream training often fails to deliver. It helps new staff, or those less familiar with complex VI needs, understand the importance of elements like contrast and background.

Supporting quotes:

- *'Its changed me … yeah… Thinking about how I look at stories and story telling'*
- *'It's been really lovely …, yeah, this is for PMLD. These kids matter'.*
- *'It's made a massive difference as a professional'.*
- *'I have people coming to me and asking about how it all works and the benefits'*
- *'I actually did a whole school training a while age on the importance of dark plain clothing'*
- *'I'm very happy and the progress that I've seen with the students is just amazing'*
- *'It's giving me a bit more confidence in myself and a couple of other of our colleagues'*

Overcoming hesitations and practical considerations

While highly beneficial, the texts also acknowledge initial reluctance from some colleagues who might find the storyteller's energetic style 'silly' or 'in your face'. However, the observed positive impact on pupils and staff quickly dispels these reservations. Practical advice includes watching recordings beforehand to prepare props and anticipate the flow and maximizing the benefits for both teachers and pupils. The only minor 'drawback' mentioned is occasionally missing another activity, but this is mitigated by timetable flexibility. The ability to use the show as a reliable resource during unforeseen disruptions (e.g., 'the pools shut suddenly') further highlights its practical value.

Supporting quotes:

- *'When you get a response out of the children, you know that you're doing it for a reason'*
- *'You need to just embrace things and go with it and just have fun and not be afraid to be silly'*

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- *'It takes something to be able to just step out and start singing out loud in front of other people'*
- *'It's hard because of all the interventions which have to happen during the day'*
- *'I'd say "give it a go because it works"'*

DISCUSSION

This study has demonstrated that the benefits of MSTS extend beyond the improvement in visual attention seen in children. Teachers themselves experience joy at the impact they are observing in pupils, describe a deeper understanding of the visual needs of individuals and how to adapt the environment to extend this beyond the duration of the show, express an improvement in confidence in how to produce accessible and inclusive materials and have the courage to share this with peers to widen the knowledge base.

Professionals across education and vision have identified the importance of understanding how a child learns in maximizing the impact of their education. A UK study identified that parental and teacher understanding of the child's CVI and individual information on strategies to support the child were important to promote successful intervention (Goodenough et al., 2021). A key factor in successful outcomes in children with developmental conditions is the provision of evidence-based care at an early age (Odom, 2009). Access to materials designed for CVI is cited as one of the top three needs of educators when working with children with CVI (Harpster et al., 2022).

The challenge of ensuring inclusion in a special needs setting should not be underestimated. Our findings mirror those of Martin (2021), who demonstrated that VI inclusion could be addressed via small-scale changes, 'sufficient to trigger reflection on the choice of pedagogical approaches … such that they deepened their understanding of inclusive practice'. For a child with PMLD, 'learning to access' encompasses developing visual stamina, visual awareness and visual curiosity, all of which may be lacking if visual materials are too difficult to see.

It has been said that the delivery of effective literacy to a child with CVI requires dedicated training in order to understand the appropriate adaptations needed to allow resources to be accessible (Harpster et al., 2022). The published literature focuses on training for qualified teachers for the visually impaired. Our study examines the impact on teachers without specialist qualification or training in VI and demonstrates that an understanding of a child's visual needs can be gained through observational learning, leading to the replication of behaviours.

Recruitment was undertaken from a range of specialist settings and age ranges and teachers at different stages of their careers.

Our study has several limitations. It is acknowledged that participants were self-selected, and it is likely that only those teachers who were enthusiastic or had noticed particular benefits were likely to respond to the invitation. It is possible that those teachers who had not seen improvement would not have registered. The interview script included a direct question about drawbacks in order to explore more negative experiences. It would be important in a future larger study to gain feedback from schools that have viewed the accessible literacy programme on a single occasion to explore the reasons they felt it lacked value or applicability in their setting. The study lacks data on the specific diagnoses or VIs of children who experienced the accessible literacy programme and was directed towards teachers of children with PMLD. Future studies could usefully explore the impact of accessible literacy programmes on children with less profound cognitive impairments.

With any qualitative research, there is a risk that insufficient participants are recruited to gain a broad enough picture from which conclusions and generalizations can be drawn. Saturation was monitored concurrently with data analysis, and it was determined that after seven interviews, additional data no longer contributed substantially new information to the research questions. At this point, recruitment was concluded, aligning with established qualitative research practices.

While thematic analysis offers a flexible and accessible approach to exploring qualitative data, it is not without limitations. The process is subjective as the identification and interpretation of themes are influenced by the researcher's judgement. There is a possibility that different researchers might generate different outcomes from the same dataset. Its flexibility, though often an advantage, can also be a drawback, as the lack of strict procedural rules may lead to inconsistency or superficial analysis.

CONCLUSION

Marvin's Story Time Show enables teachers to observe the impact of these simple adaptations on a child's visual attention and responses and learn the individual requirements of each learner. The show is more than a teaching tool—it fosters emotional resonance between teacher, students and content. Joy becomes both the means and the outcome of

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the learning experience. The story time show does not just entertain—it models inclusive techniques that educators adopt beyond the show.

These changes improve engagement, especially for pupils with VI and PMLD. The influence of the show extends well beyond its runtime, fostering inclusive pedagogy and reflection on how to better support each learner's unique ways of engaging. For professionals working with students with complex needs, feeling acknowledged and resourced matters. The show serves as a source of morale, ideas and validation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Rachel F. Pilling: Methodology; data collection and analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Gwyneth McCormack:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing.

FUNDING INFORMATION

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

GM is the director of Positive Eye Ltd. and Marvin Story Time Show.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Approved by the University of Bradford Humanities, Social and Health Sciences Research Ethics Panel (E1250).

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Joy	The first theme we found from the feedback statements is the joy that MSTS brought to the children. Can you speak to how that made you feel as a teacher?
Environment	The MSTS uses techniques to help PMLD children access material visually and shows how you can adapt a classroom environment to make it easier for children with PMLD to access their learning. Can you speak about any changes you might have made around this?
Attention	The second theme we found from the feedback was how some children seem to pay attention during the show when they usually find literacy activities difficult to access. Can you tell me anything about how this has impacted you or your approach when teaching?
More of this, less of that	What might you 'do more of' as a result of how you have seen the children respond? What might you do less of?
Knowledge and confidence	Some of the feedback has indicated that the MSTS has given teachers confidence in the way they prepare resources. Can you speak about the way the MSTS might have affected your knowledge and confidence?
Benefits and drawbacks	How do you feel the MSTS has benefited you as a person? Has it changed how you feel about your job, your role, the impact you have? What are the drawbacks to using the MSTS? Are there any activities it has drawn you away from?
Aim and purpose	If you were to give advice to a teacher or school who have not experienced the MSTS, what would you say? How would you describe the purpose of the MSTS for children with PMLD? And the purpose for a teacher, class or school?
Sum up	Is there anything else we have not talked about which you would like us to know? Are there any questions you would like to ask?

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