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CASE STUDIES SERIES

Ella

* Name changed for confidentiality.

Background

Ella was selected by the Inclusion and Attendance Department as she was not attending any classes in school. She had recently moved from a nearby school to live with her mother.

Her attendance was poor, and on the occasions, she did come to school, she would only spend time in the staff member's room and never attend classes. Although there were often other pupils present, Ella would hide behind a book, as she is a voracious reader. At home, her mother was undergoing cancer treatment, and Ella, an only child, was dividing her time between her mother's and father's households.

Ella is very articulate and engaging in conversation with adults but is insecure when speaking to her peers, and she had not made any friends at her new school.

Initial Presentation

During the introductory session, Ella appeared nervous but was intelligent, articulate, and easy to talk to one-to-one. As part of the session, she took part in a paired activity where pupils asked and answered questions before introducing their partner to the group. When it was Ella's turn, she spoke clearly and without hesitation, masking her panic well. However, she left at break and missed the following session, later confiding to the staff member that she had experienced a panic attack and felt nervous in the group. Despite this shaky start, Ella made the brave decision to return and to keep pushing herself outside her comfort zone.

Engagement and Progress

In the nursery, Ella was naturally drawn to the shy children, whom she gently engaged with and read stories to. As the weeks progressed, she joined in with more activities as the children she had supported grew in confidence. Ella's attendance pattern was roughly every second week until week 12. For most sessions, she only came if the staff member could accompany her, but around the halfway point she began attending independently. She tentatively started talking to her peers in the nursery and gradually relaxed and engaged more.

In week 3, she befriended a shy peer who usually had another close friend; in that friend's absence, Ella and this pupil connected. Their friendship continued and grew stronger, and by week 8, Ella considered this peer, along with her family and her support staff member, part of her innermost circle of relationships.

By week 12, Ella pushed herself further socially, attending the eco-visit and joining in with the group activities. She even sat with her new friends on the train journey, later reflecting: "I also pushed myself to come to the eco-visit and be sociable." That same week she attended a school trip to Landmark and returned to nursery, her busiest and most social week since starting at the school.

After this turning point, she attended every session and grew very close with one particular friend. The pair bonded over humour, especially joking about their mothers' lack of fashion sense, and they often advised facilitators on their style choices. Their laughter frequently filled the room. They took the initiative to decorate for the celebration day, proudly hanging lanterns, creating a table of party food, and making party bags. They had even requested bubbles and bouncy balls for the celebration, which they used to add fun to the day.

At the celebration, Ella also connected with the most socially confident group member through their shared love of reading. They spoke animatedly about falling in love with characters and the bittersweet feeling of finishing a beloved book series. They exchanged tips on accessing books from obscure authors, deepening their bond.

Next Steps

Looking ahead, Ella decided to give herself a fresh start in S4, reasoning that everyone would be starting new classes together and she would be in the same position as her peers. With new friendships to support her, she said: "I'm now going into most classes now I'm in S4. I'll probably go to full classes after the summer."

Reflections from Ella

"I feel it was a big achievement to leave my house and go to the nursery, and to talk to the children."

"I learnt that I can put myself out of my comfort zone sometimes."

"It helped me to get out of the house because I didn't leave the house. And more confidence."

Aspirations

Although Ella is not yet certain about her long-term aspirations, she is beginning to explore options that may connect with her love of reading.