



**My Kind of Book**

# **Bold, Clear, Sensory and Strong**

*Creating Accessible  
Picture Books*



This report shares combined findings from two studies on picture book accessibility conducted by My Kind of Book. Through work in and connections with special schools and units, My Kind of Book came to observe that teachers consistently adapt picture books to make them accessible for their pupils with additional needs. We applied for funding from the Connected Innovator Fund to begin to capture and share teachers' experiences and knowledge in this area. Our goal was to begin to build a toolkit to help enable authors, illustrators and publishers to create books with increased accessibility for children with additional needs.

Parallel to this study, My Kind of Book conducted a project (2021/2022) to create and gather feedback on prototype books designed with increased accessibility in mind for children with complex additional needs (funded by Creative Scotland).

The need for picture books to be more accessible came through extremely strongly in both studies.

**The findings shared in this report focus on the following:**

1. Teacher participant perspectives on the lack of accessibility in picture books;
2. Teacher participant views on what qualities help make picture books accessible;
3. Participant responses to My Kind of Book's prototype picture books.

The overwhelming majority of teacher participants told us that they are frustrated with the choice of picture books available to their pupils and that they spend considerable time and energy adapting books to make them engaging for their pupils. At the same time, the participating teachers and parents shared rich descriptions of what they want to see in accessible picture books.

**89% of the teachers surveyed said they were frustrated by picture books**



**While accessibility considerations for picture book engagement varies for each child with complex additional needs, this study found that the teacher and parent responses brought up recurring features while envisioning accessible books. These include:**

- Simplicity and clarity in visuals and text;
- Narrative elements that include sensory and interactive dimensions;
- Use of exciting language;
- Representation of children with complex additional needs in illustrations;
- Accessible structure, size and strength of the physical book.

The importance of these elements in creating accessible books is an area which we strongly believe needs further large-scale and peer-reviewed research.

We conclude this report with a set of questions for authors, illustrators and publishers to ask themselves when making accessible picture books. These questions should lead to the creation of books which are more engaging, meaningful and fun for children with additional needs; books which are bold, clear, sensory and strong.

**“ Sharing a book can be a little pocket of time that is very beautiful in the day ”**



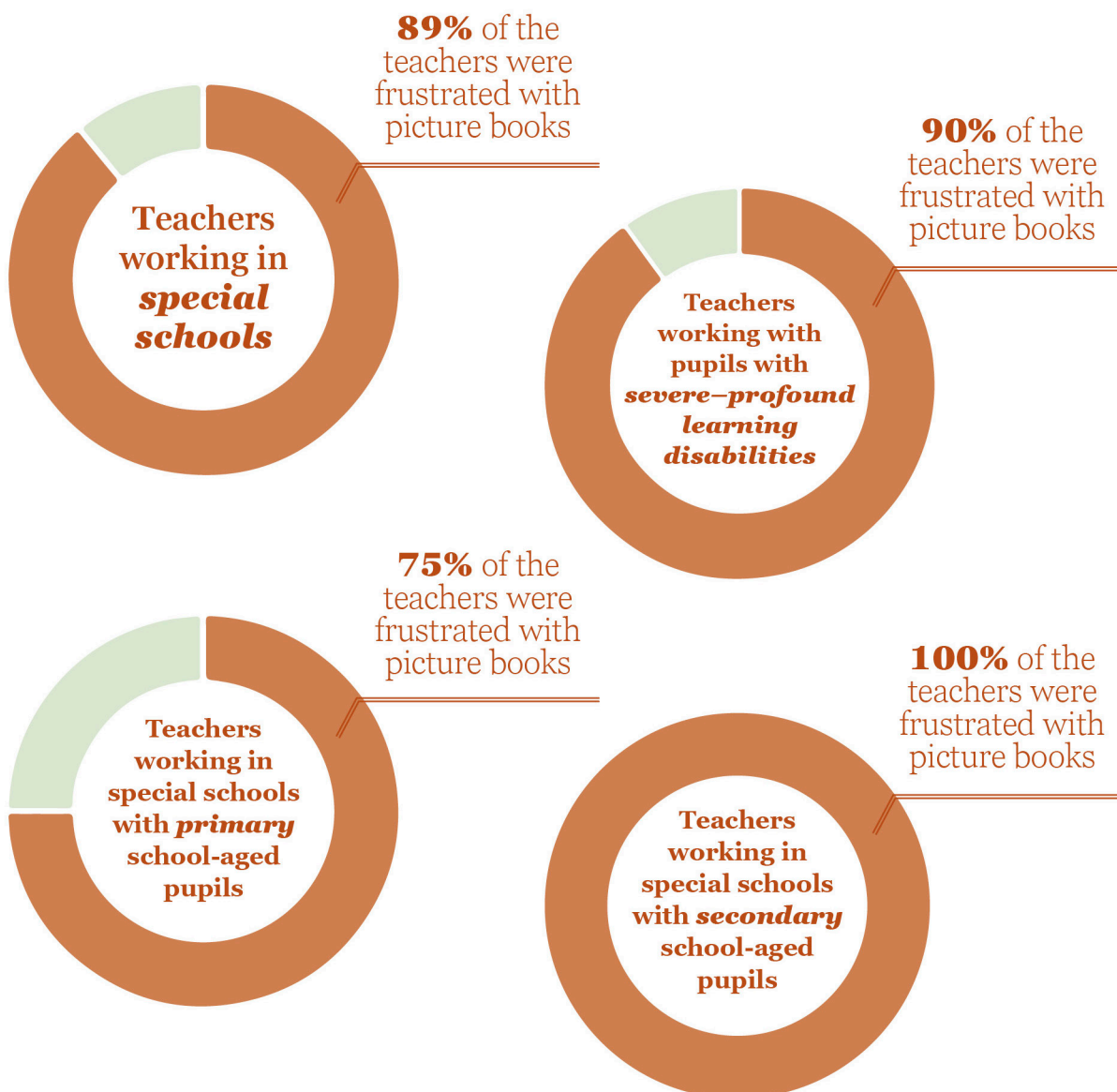
## The Problem: Lack of Accessibility

The teachers told us that the people who create picture books show a lack of understanding of issues around accessibility:

“ Fabulous stories but with little awareness of access/usability issues. ”

“ Unless I or my staff take the time to adapt them, they [picture books] are pretty useless. ”

Levels of frustration with picture books were high among the teachers:



**Most of the teachers said they would make four or more changes to a book in order to make it work for their class and it was not uncommon for teachers to be planning up to ten changes to a book. These included:**

- Creating a sensory story version of the text or linking it to sensory activities;
- Creating a story massage version of the text;
- Shortening and/or simplifying the text;
- Enlarging and/or simplifying the illustrations (e.g. by covering parts of the illustration up);
- Using a marker to outline the illustrations;
- Putting the images and/or text on an interactive whiteboard;
- Changing the wording or illustrations to make them more age-appropriate;
- Adding actions, music, voice output communication aids or sound effects;
- Adding symbols from a symbol system or creating a signing version of the story.

The complexity of the process that teachers go through when assessing and adapting a picture book can seem formidable. There is a wealth of invisible and undervalued expertise intrinsic to this process, and it is a very under-researched area of teacher practice. Teachers are so used to adapting books for their pupils that many no longer question the fact that it is necessary. It may be that teachers in special schools will always need to make some adaptations to books, but we believe that there is much that could be done by authors, illustrators and publishers to make this less necessary. In this report we are concentrating on changes to picture books that are relatively straightforward to include in the creation and production of books.

“ **Unless I or my staff take the time to adapt them, they [picture books] are pretty useless.** ”



## What qualities make picture books accessible?

### **Simplicity**

By far the most common reason given for picture books being rejected or needing to be adapted for children with additional needs was their complexity.

88% of the teachers in our study said that they would like to be able to find less complex picture books for their pupils. This rose to 93% for teachers who were working with children with a visual impairment as well as learning disabilities.

The teachers told us that stories *'need to be broken down into smaller parts'*, are *'too long'*, *'too complicated'* and *'too wordy'*, that the vocabulary is *'inaccessible'* and the books have *'too many words'* and *'too much text'*. They want books that are *'simple but not babyish'* and they want shorter books or *'books that can be dipped into'*.

**This complexity means that teachers are often forced to use books for babies and toddlers no matter what age of pupils they are working with. They expressed their exasperation with this:**

“ *[It's frustrating] to have to have a book that is for babies/pre-schoolers so that someone with PMLD [profound and multiple learning disabilities] can enjoy it ...* ”

“ *The thing that we find most frustrating is that it is difficult to find books for our older children with appropriate language/ accessible pictures.* ”

“ *[I get frustrated by] board books that have toddler written on them; we need board books and tactile books for all learners with PMLD.* ”

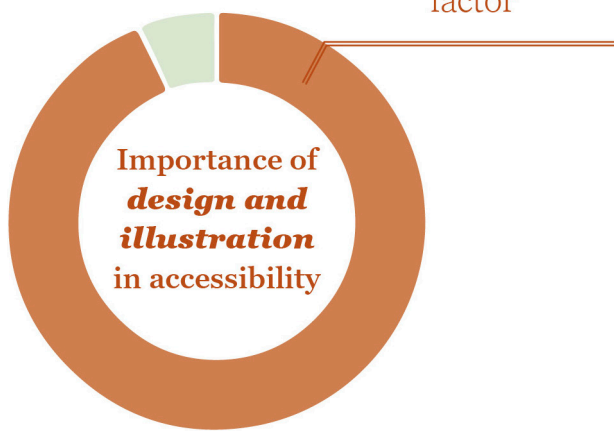
“ *Please take off the word toddler [from the cover of the book] ... this book is perfect for [my pupils] but by adding the word toddler to it, it feels inappropriate.* ”

“ *It's hard to find simple texts that are age-appropriate for older pupils.* ”

**Bold, clear design**

The look of a book is very important for teachers when assessing whether their pupils will find it engaging.

94% of the teachers think this is an important factor



Here too teachers are looking for simplicity. They said that picture books *'have too much visual information on a page'*, with

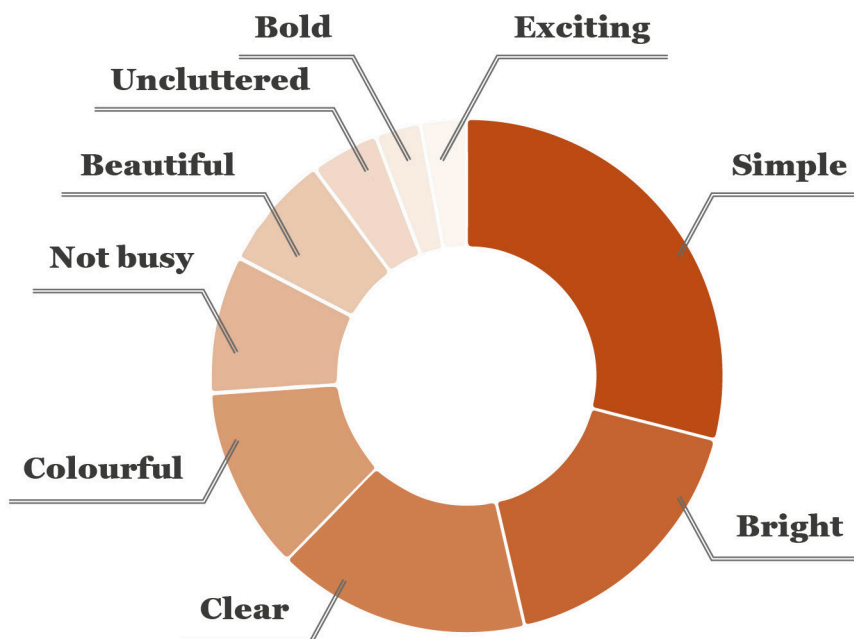
images that are too *'visually complex'*, *'confusing'* and *'far too busy for pupils with visual impairments and cerebral visual impairments'*.

However, our group did not see this desire for simplicity of design as a negative thing; very often they coupled it with qualities such as beauty, boldness and vibrancy:

“ My pupils love bright, clear and fun illustrations on not too busy backgrounds. ”

“ My pupils like simple, vibrant books to look at during their choosing time. ”

In the following chart we can see the most common words used by the teachers to describe the design and illustration styles they are seeking in picture books:



**High-contrast or black and white books were frequently mentioned. 46% of the teachers said they would like more books with these features, but this increased to 80% of the teachers working with pupils with a visual impairment:**

“ *More black and white books that are aimed at primary-aged pupils would be great.* ”

“ *[I would] make the pictures high-contrast colours with fluorescent parts.* ”

Many of the teachers told us that children with complex additional needs often find photographic illustration more accessible than other types of illustration.

The need for space in books was also frequently mentioned. Teachers told us that space in a picture book helps a child to focus on what is important in the story. A space in a book also encourages the person who is

reading the book to pause, thus creating a better pace for the pupil with additional needs to engage meaningfully with the text:

“ *[My pupils] need processing time and time to anticipate.* ”

### **Sensory elements**

The results of our survey showed that the most common way that the teachers adapt books is by creating a sensory story version of the text. They add in props and sensory elements to make the story more meaningful and more engaging.

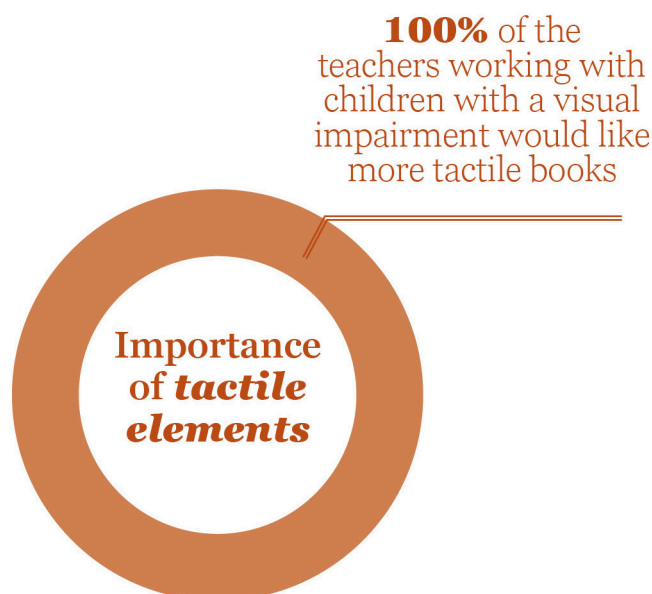
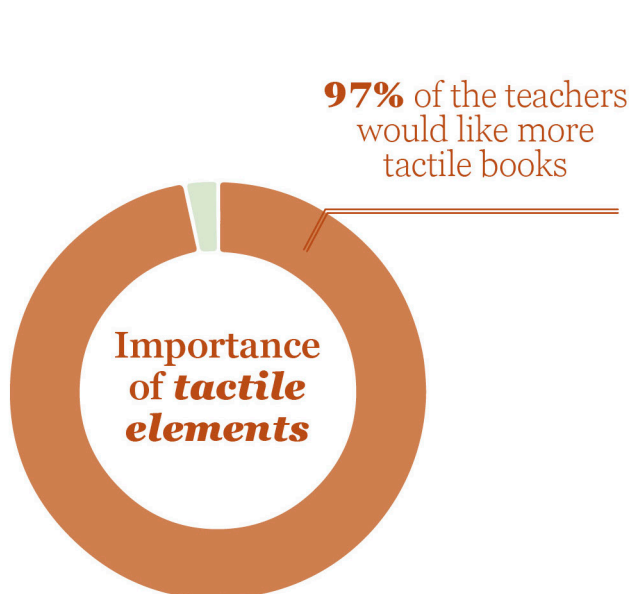
“ *Ideally every page of a book would lead to a sensory exploration of something real.* ”

However, the process involved in ‘translating’ a mainstream picture book into a series of sensory experiences is complex and time-consuming. My Kind of Book plans to carry out further studies into the creation and use of sensory stories as we feel this is a subject requiring exploration.





There are of course books that already contain a sensory element, e.g. tactile or sound books. Both of these types of books were popular with the teachers in our study; tactile books in particular were very sought-after:



Some teachers pointed out, however, that these books are not designed with children with additional needs in mind. The tactile and noisy elements are often difficult for a child with limited manual dexterity or a visual impairment to access. Furthermore, these elements in the book are often peripheral to the story. The teachers also told us that these books are often not age-appropriate as children get older. They spoke about needing books *‘which are large, with large tactile elements’*, and with *‘simple tactile features linked to pre-braille skills’* and *‘simple pictures to feel to match the age-appropriate texts’*.

### Exciting language and opportunities for interaction

Teachers explained to us that their pupils often have less motivation to engage with books than their peers in mainstream schools:

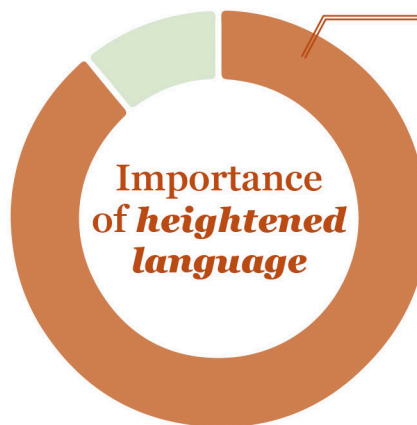
*“ It’s not that my pupils aren’t wanting to look at books, but the books need to motivate them to engage. My pupils do not have the intrinsic desire to engage that other children might have so the books have to be highly motivating. The books need to be very exciting in order to engage the children. ”*

For this reason, the need for exciting language and opportunities for interaction were mentioned frequently, both in the survey responses and the interviews:

77% of the teachers want books with more heightened language



87% of the teachers working with children with a visual impairment and learning disabilities want books with more heightened language



“ [We need books where the reader] uses different voices, intonations, actions and volumes to create the atmosphere and to tell the story in a way that captures their imaginations. ”

“ [We like books with] lots of describing words that allow the storyteller to use voice ... ”



**Rhyme, rhythm and repetition were mentioned most often as being ways of making language accessible:**

“ *My children love repetition, call and response and anything involving environmental sounds.* ”

“ *All the pupils enjoy rhyme, rhythm and repetition.* ”

“ *[We like] really catchy rhythms with rhyme and repetition to support anticipation.* ”

“ *[We like] rhyming, predictable structure, surprise at the end!* ”

“ *Our children really need ... pattern and anticipation.* ”



The teachers said they wanted books which enthusiastically invite engagement and engender active participation. They told us that they often make additions to books to make the child's role more active (for example, by linking the book to a sensory activity).

“ We want books that encourage movement and participation. ”

“ Our pupils need to handle things and do stuff! They are more likely to be engaged with a story that is interactive ... ”

“ Our pupils... struggle with too much language and will switch off if [the] story is too long. ”

### **Illustrations of children with complex additional needs**

Although representation of children with disabilities in picture books has increased over recent years, it is still extremely rare to find illustrations of children with complex additional needs in picture books. **Many of the teachers were frustrated by the slow progress in this area:**

“ Illustrations [are] not inclusive enough – no pictures with tube feeders/tracheostomies etc. ”

“ We need more books with inclusive characters. ”

“ [There is a] lack of representation without it being a tick-box exercise. ”



### **Physical accessibility**

Structural factors such as size, materials and format of a book all play an important role in the book's accessibility. **The importance of books being structurally robust was frequently mentioned:**

“ They [picture books] are often not very strong and are prone to being ripped when pages are turned. ”

Many of the teachers also mentioned the need for larger books, particularly, but not exclusively, for pupils with a visual impairment. **They also spoke about the need for books to be designed so that it is as easy as possible for the child to be in control of their own reading experience. For example:**

“ My children need board books with tabs so they can turn the pages. ”

“ The little handle [attached to a particular book] means I can attach it to my pupil's [wheel]chair – so he has been picking it up and exploring it ... ”

**Structural factors such as size, materials and format of a book all play an important role in the book's accessibility.**



## An Approach to Creating Accessible Books

The process of creating prototype books and then asking teachers and parents to respond to these was an incredibly valuable one for My Kind of Book. The feedback we received was very practical and rooted in a deep understanding of the needs of the child(ren). At the same time responses were very creative and the professionals and parents could often see potential for developing and/or using the books in ways that had not occurred to us. (This is perhaps because teachers and parents are involved in a constant process of adapting and developing books and other resources for their children and young people.) For example, *Light On/Light Off* is a black and white prototype book which we designed with children with a visual impairment in mind. Response to this was very positive:

“ *[There are] not enough high-contrast books which are not for babies.* ”

We were given ideas for developing the book further:

“ *You could add shadow puppet templates at the end ...* ”

We had included several black pages for visual contrast, but teachers also commented on the effect this had on the narrative:

“ *... the blank pages structure the story for the teller as well as the reader ... the teller is supported to create anticipation and realisation in [a] loop through a ‘burst/pause’ set-up. Tellers are supported by the black page to go right back to ‘nothing’ before each plot twist, thus giving the reveal the biggest impact for someone with complex needs.* ”

**We had also not foreseen that teachers working with pupils on the autism spectrum would find the black and white design of the book very useful:**

“ *It would be fascinating to use this book with the children to help them focus.* ”

We developed the prototype book *The River* with a spine along the top rather than the side. We were interested in whether we could create a book that could be shared knee-to-knee rather than side-by-side. (It can be difficult to share a story side-by-side with a child who is in a bulky electric wheelchair.) There were some problems with this book which we had not

considered; one teacher working in a nursery with children with profound and multiple learning disabilities commented:

“ *Many of my children would not be able to lower their eyes to look at the images in the book. It would need to be designed to work when held up as well as laid flat.* ”

However, some people were very positive about the format, but possibly for a slightly different group of children than that which we had originally envisaged. A parent told us:

“ *I wish all books had this format. I love it ... I am always encouraging [my daughter's] care workers to sit facing her when they are interacting with her. It encourages focus, eye contact ...* ”

Developing this book further for a slightly different group of readers means that we will now make changes to the content and structure of the story.



## Moving Forward

My Kind of Book hopes that two things will come out of this study:

### More research

There is an immediate need for further research into the issues around accessibility in children's books. The structure, design, text and illustration of picture books all need

further exploration. It is essential that the requirements of children and young people of different ages and with a range of different needs are better understood.

### A shift in the understanding of inclusion and accessibility in children's books

Every aspect of a book needs to be considered. The following questions should be asked:

#### *The physical structure of the book:*

- Is it big enough?
- Is it strong enough?
- How easy is it to handle the book and turn the pages?

#### *The design of the book:*

- Is it bold and clear?
- Could it be age-appropriate for a range of ages?
- Does it allow for pauses in the story – space for processing and anticipation?

#### *The sensory (tactile and auditory) elements of the book:*

- Are these accessible for someone with limited manual dexterity and/or a visual impairment?
- Do they help to tell the story?

#### *The story:*

- Is the structure simple?
- Is the meaning communicated clearly?
- Does it contain exciting language (rhyme, rhythm, repetition, funny noises, exaggerated intonations, intriguing sounds ...)?
- Could it be age-appropriate for a range of ages?
- Does it make a strong invitation to interaction?

#### *The illustrations:*

- Are they simple and uncluttered?
- Are they big and bold?
- Do they contain depictions of people with additional needs (including those with complex needs)?



## Appendix: Research Methods

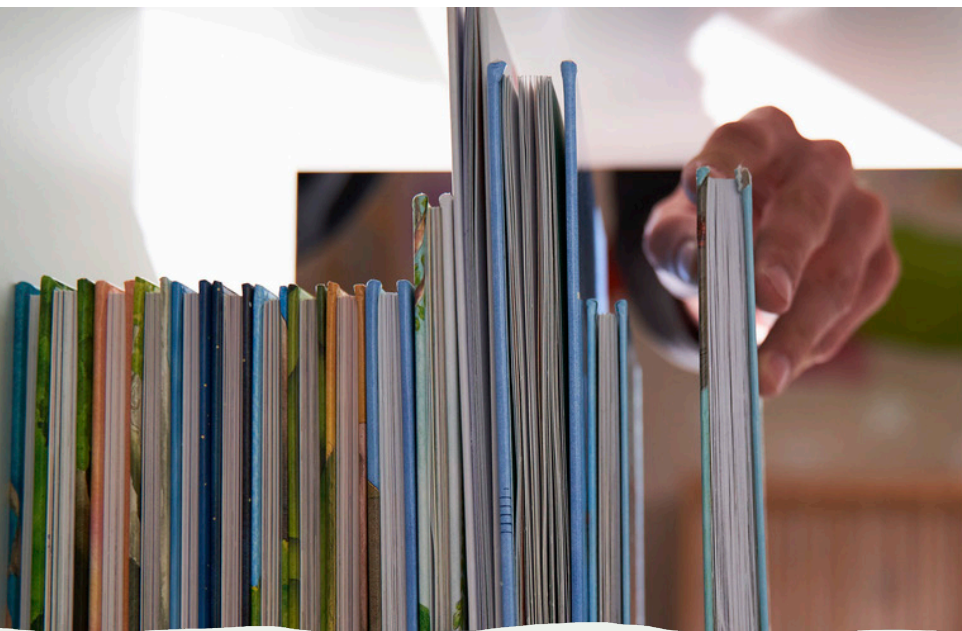
### Book Use in Special Schools (Connected Innovator Project):

In 2022, data was gathered by online survey of thirty-six teachers working in special schools and units throughout the UK (from Cornwall to Perth). The teachers worked with children and young people from three to eighteen years of age, with a wide range of complex needs including profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD), sensory impairments and children on the autism spectrum. The majority of the teachers worked with pupils with needs in the severe to profound range. The teachers were asked general questions about their use of picture books. They were also each sent a set of four recently published and well-reviewed picture books and were then asked how they used and/or adapted these books for their pupils. Having these four books at the centre of the survey made it easy to compare the strategies and the themes that emerged in the responses.

### Prototype Book Project (Creative Scotland, Sustaining Creative Development Fund):

Five prototype books, developed by Ailie Finlay (My Kind of Book founder) working in partnership with artist/illustrator Kate Leiper, were shared with two publishing professionals, two parents of children with complex additional needs, and a subset of eight teachers from those interviewed by online survey in the Connected Innovator project. The participants were asked for their responses to the five prototype books in relation to accessibility and publishing, and also asked more generally about how picture books could be made more accessible.

(Note: We are aware of the lack of feedback directly from the children and young people in these studies. Both projects were developed during the Covid pandemic and for this reason no face-to-face contact with children or young people was included.)





## My Kind of Book

My Kind of Book is an Edinburgh-based, not-for-profit organisation. We create books and sensory stories for children with complex additional needs, and campaign for greater inclusivity in the children's book sector.

We would like to thank Creative Scotland, Creative Informatics and Creative Edinburgh for the funding that allowed us to carry out this research. We would also like to thank the parents, teachers and publishing professionals who took part in the projects. We have learnt so much in our conversations and exchanges with you all and are extremely grateful for your time, expertise and enthusiasm. We hope that this research will take us a little closer to the time when all children can have access to fun and engaging books.

Please visit our website to find out more about our work:

[mykindofbook.org.uk](https://mykindofbook.org.uk)

If you would like to discuss this research further or are involved in an area of related research we would love to hear from you:

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