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Citation:

Glazzard, J (2014) Sophie: a story of inclusion. *Childhood Explorer*, 1 (1). pp. 14-15.

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Document Version:

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Sophie: A Story of Inclusion

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When I first met Sophie, I had been invited to meet her before she transferred into my Reception class (first year of primary school) to begin her full-time education. She was almost 5 years old and had been at a nursery school for two years. Her parents were concerned about the upcoming move to a mainstream school, as Sophie had so far only spoken to her immediate family and one close friend.

Sophie's mother cried as she explained her concerns about her daughter. There were no problems relating directly to Sophie's speech; she simply chose not to communicate with the majority of the people she encountered in her life. During the previous year, she had elected to communicate freely with one of her peers but only when she felt comfortable; even that communication would cease whenever other children were in

proximity. Sophie's parents had received support from a specialist in an attempt to encourage their daughter to speak. Nevertheless, Sophie continued to remain mute other than when in the company of her parents, her elder sister, or her confidante at the nursery school. Even when she was hurt, she would not cry out despite the tears running down her face. Understandably, her parents were both concerned and clearly distressed about

the prospect of Sophie beginning full-time education. I also had concerns. This was a new challenge for me; nothing in my previous experiences as a teacher prepared me for Sophie's elective mutism. Before Sophie joined my setting, I explored ways to support and include this little girl. I found a plethora of explanations for her situation, but little that I felt guided me in helping her. I spent hours pondering this problem; eventually, I focused on the realization that while Sophie chose not to talk, she did understand the communications of others. I formulated my approach with this fact in mind. I would include Sophie as I would any other child, but I would not pressure her to enter into reciprocal communication.

When Sophie joined my Reception class, she continued in her world of silence as anticipated. She showed no distress in the environment and quickly complied with the expectations. Sophie appeared to be comfortable in group and whole class teaching situations, responding well to instructions, although she showed no emotions, neither smiling nor frowning. I taught her as I would have taught any other child, assuming that she understood me.

Assessing her development in reading was a challenge, which I initially surmounted by asking her to show me graphemes in response to the sounds I articulated. Her special friend from nursery school had joined my setting at the same time as Sophie and she became an invaluable asset in the assessment process. Sophie would be invited to read with Bella because "I was busy." On such occasions, I would place myself within hearing distance of the girls as Sophie happily read her book to Bella. I was careful not to make eye contact with Sophie at first. Soon, however, I would smile at them once they finished the reading activity, making simple comments about how they seemed to love their books and inviting them to share their favorite book with me. Bella responded enthusiastically, but Sophie would simply turn the page, pointing at pictures and cautiously smiling at me. I responded positively to that interaction on her part, being careful to make comments only and avoid direct questions. I was in fact ignoring her refusal to communicate

verbally with me while continuing to treat her as I did the other children.

Sophie, of course, communicated freely with her parents and they, in turn, shared with me how much Sophie was enjoying school. Within three months, her mother excitedly reported that Sophie was telling her each morning that she was going to speak to me when she got to school. But day after day, she remained mute in the classroom. However, I did notice that Sophie was now more readily choosing to make eye contact with me and she would smile when I returned her gaze. In group and whole class discussions, she began to respond by raising her hand. If I called upon her, however, she would remain silent. I responded by smiling and then moved on, allowing another child to respond. This situation continued for another few weeks; during that time, I always included Sophie in our discussions by acknowledging her raised hand.

I could sense that Sophie was ready to speak to me, but it was important that she be the one to choose the time for doing so. That moment finally came. On a day just like any other, Sophie raised her hand in response to a question I had asked. When I called upon her, she gave a clear and audible answer. I remember that moment so clearly. I fought with myself to respond calmly to this breakthrough. I acknowledged her response and her good ideas and then continued with the lesson. Deep down, I was stifling the desire to shout out, "Yes, Yes. You've done it, Sophie."

The turning point really was as simple as I have described. From that day on, Sophie spoke to me without hesitation. As the weeks went by, her confidence grew and she began to speak to other teachers. Sophie was achieving and making good progress. When the final term in her Reception class began, Sophie was happily communicating with all her peers and the adults. While she did choose to remain silent whenever she encountered new people, she was, without doubt, fully included in our setting and confidently communicating with all of us.

