

# Speech Bubbles National Programme September 2021 – July 2022

Report prepared by Adam Power-Annand

## Using drama, play and stories to help children aged 5-7 develop confidence, communication, and creativity

Speech Bubbles is a weekly drama programme taking place in school time, designed to give young children an opportunity to have fun telling stories and acting them out.

The programme has a particular emphasis on supporting children to gain confidence and develop their physical and verbal communication skills.



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## 1. Introduction

This year has been a uniquely challenging one for the arts, for education and for our children. Despite the lifting of restrictions and a social and political drive to 'open up' society schools were still being impacted daily by the pandemic. Maintaining Covid risk assessments, dealing with unprecedented levels of staff and pupil absence as well as responding to the impact on the children of living through the previous 18 months of lockdowns and social isolation.

At times it felt a little bit like we might be the cat in this Speech Bubbles story...

### **The Cat and the Forest by M (aged 6)**

*A cat's going in the forest and there's a wolf and the wolf was shouting, and the cats scared of the wolf and the cat hides behind a tree, the wolf's walking and the wolf can't see the cat and when the wolf walked past that tree the cat ran away from the wolf, and the wolf seen the cat and the cats running and the wolf runs and got the cat.*

*The End,*

However, as the year progressed it was a little more like being the Twins in this story...

### **The secret house by E (aged 6)**

*Twins Jack and Susie were playing in their garden. They saw a flashing light in their house, the house turned bright there were sparkles. They went into the house there were fairies and unicorns in the house. They went upstairs to their rooms, all the toys they ever wanted were there and there were no mean parents. They found secret yummy food and nice parents came. They were fairy godmothers who gave them wands and wings. A kitty came and sparkles went everywhere. Then they took a deep breath. They were so happy.*

*They lived happily ever after!*

## 2. Description of practice

We delivered two versions of Speech Bubbles this year, the standard 24-week model and a shorter 'recovery' version now renamed the Bounce Back programme. In both cases small groups of referred children took part in weekly small group drama sessions that focussed on:

- Positive social interaction
- Communication
- Confidence

At the centre of every session was one child's unique imagined story acted out by their peers.

In both models Speech Bubbles was delivered by a specialist drama practitioner and a member of the school's support staff – usually a Teaching Assistant.



### 3. Monitoring

**10 theatre partners** delivered the programme in their regions.

- M6 Theatre – Rochdale
- Oldham Theatre Workshop – Oldham
- Peoplescape – Manchester
- NW Drama - Salford
- Immediate Theatre – Hackney
- Kazzum Arts – Newham
- Half Moon Theatre – Tower Hamlets
- London Bubble – Lewisham and Southwark
- Speech Bubbles CIO – Bromley, Bexley, Croydon, Lambeth
- Trinity Theatre – Kent

This reached

- **1390 children**
- **74 schools**

All the participating children had been referred by their school to support their communication, social interaction, creativity and confidence.

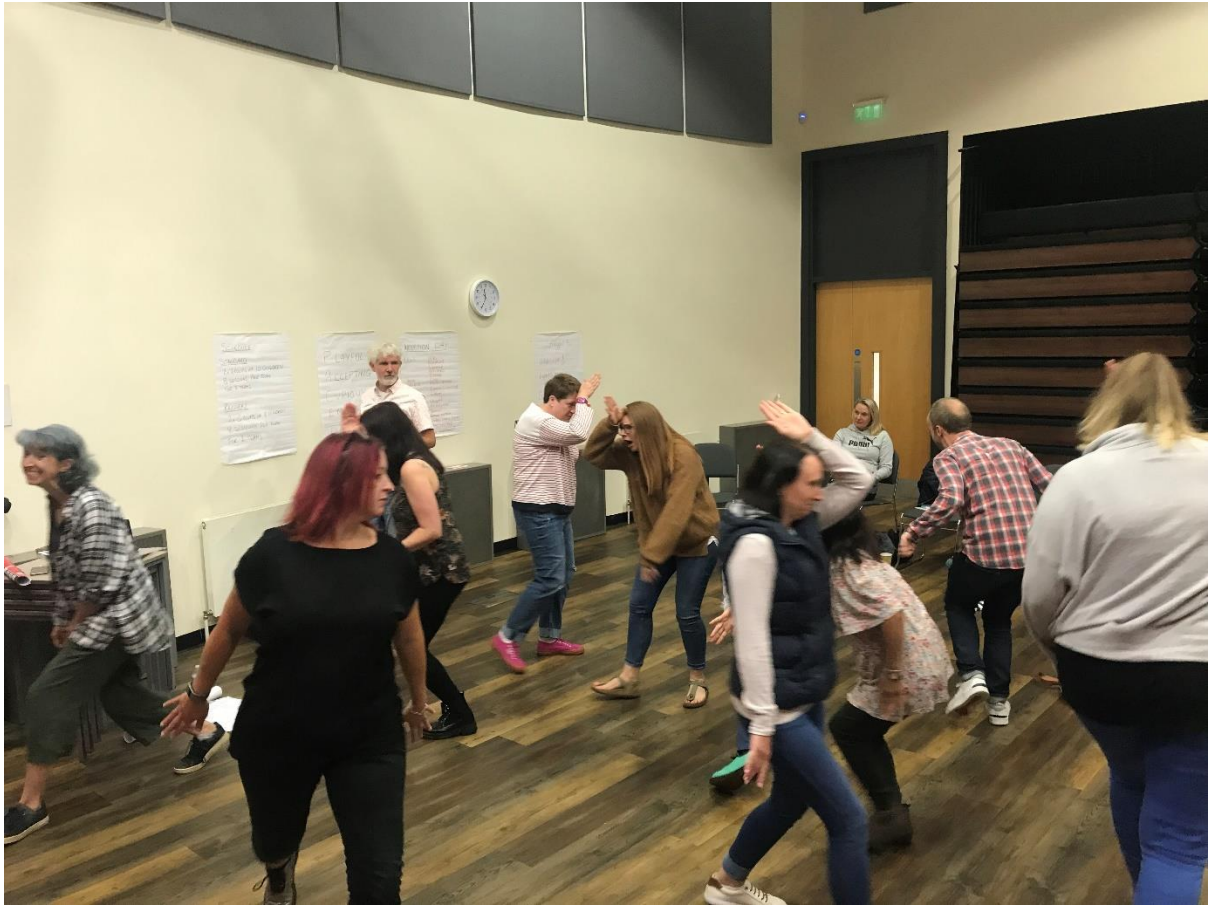
**Of those children:**

- **37% were eligible for Pupil Premium against an average of 23.2% in all Primary schools.**
- **36% were identified as EAL against an average of 20.6% in all Primary Schools.**

We continued to support the freelance practitioner team and the school delivery staff with additional training around children's Social, Emotional and Mental Health and the connection with communication.

- **80 school staff attended CPD certified training.**
- **32 drama practitioners attended CPD certified training.**

Teaching Assistants and Drama Practitioners – serious training!



#### 4. Outcomes for the children

This year the outcomes are separated into the benefits for children who took part in the standard programme and those who took part in the shorter Bounce Back programme. These outcomes are all based on pre & post project assessments completed by the class teachers or SENDCo's. They represent changes that adults see in the children back in class.

In the standard Speech Bubbles programme  
24-week programme with 10 children per group

We have complete pre and post project data on **867 children** who participated from Sept 21 –July 22. The thing that we are most proud to report on is that the children showed significant progress in the programme with classroom teachers reporting that:

- **86% showed improvements in emotion behaviour and conduct behaviour and of those 57% were clear to striking improvements**
- **86% showed improvements in speaking, listening and learning and of those 58% were clear to striking improvements**

And in the comment's teachers reported that:

- **78% showed improvements back in class and of those 57% were clear to striking improvements**

The following comments represent the range of children's progress that was reported on, this includes children who showed no progress and those who slipped back:

Pre Assessment	Post Assessment
<b>Striking Improvement</b>	
Is well behaved but shy and has difficulty participating. Is VERY quiet when speaking in class.	J started the year as a quiet, shy. Has really come out of her shell and is now confident to speak aloud with both adults and peers.
Reluctant to speak in class unless really confident in his answer. Very quiet.	E has progressed with learning, has excellent relationship with friends. Answers questions more in class and asks for support if doesn't understand the task.
<b>Clear improvement</b>	
Low self-confidence and low confidence in speaking in front of a lot of people.	Is more confident at answer questions in class and is confident in what she does.

F struggles to write and speak in full sentences. Lacks confidence. Struggles to structure sentences that make sense	F has grown in confidence and is in line with peers. Still struggles with sentences structures in writing but can articulate well
Very low confidence and very quiet while speaking	L has grown in confidence this year. She can work independently & follow instructions.
<b>Slight Improvement</b>	
M struggles with anxiety and confidence. Cries if she does anything wrong and struggles to cope if things changes suddenly.	M has grown in confidence but is still nervous and does not like deviation from routine.
Y has trouble concentrating for the duration of an activity. Can also struggle to form sense-making sentences	Y has improved his ability to have conversations and to understand instructions
<b>No Change/Slipped back</b>	
S finds it difficult to maintain attention during class.	S is still struggling in class. He sometimes finds it difficult in regulating his emotions and expressing how he is feeling
Reluctant to share ideas in whole class setting. Will often need adult prompting if given a question to answer. Will wait for adult support before starting task.	T has found this area of development challenging, warrants further support in this area

## The Bounce Back model

16-week programme with 8 children per group

We have complete pre and post project data on **288 children** who participated from Sept 21 – Mar 22. We are proud to report that the children showed significant progress in the programme with classroom teachers reporting that:

- **88% showed improvements in emotion behaviour and conduct behaviour**
- **84% showed improvements in speaking, listening and learning**

And in the comment's teachers said that:

- **95% showed improvements back in class**

The following represent the range of children's progress that was reported on:

<b>Pre-Assessment</b>	<b>Post-Assessment</b>
<b>Striking Improvement</b>	
F is very shy, does not regularly participate in class despite knowing the answers.	F has gained a lot of confidence regularly participates in class discussions. shares ideas.
Needs support on calmly speaking about needs/ wants. When upset / annoyed will react by 'sulking' or crying. Can be unkind to peers shouting, pushing when unhappy.	Huge progress with ability to communicate wants and needs. Much better at managing her emotions and has lots of positive relationships with peers.
<b>Clear improvement</b>	
Child's language skills are still developing (Spanish speaker), she struggles with tense and structuring sentences.	More confident in expressing herself and sharing ideas. Some improvements in spoken English and written work.
L seems to lack confidence in reading and writing, mum also has concerns as she feels she can't provide support	L has started to contribute more during whole class teaching and seems more confident to discuss work and interests.
M finds it difficult to listen and attend to others both during carpet sessions and in her play. She has limited vocabulary which makes her reluctant to speak in class.	M is now confident at communicating her needs and interests both to adults and children. She is confident at explaining herself and will ask for help when needed.
<b>Slight Improvement</b>	



A has a stammer which her parents are very concerned about.	Shown more confidence to speak in class.
Lacks confidence	More confidence communicating with peers and adults.
<b>No Change/Slipped back</b>	
H is shy and struggles with his sight. Needs more support developing his speaking and listening and developing vocab.	No Change

### Literacy

Speech Bubbles does not have specific literacy targets; however, we are aware that the referred children often have low levels of assessed literacy.

Before: 12% of referred children were at or above national standard for writing

Post: 27% were at the national standard or 'working at greater depth'

Before: 18% were at or above the national standard for reading

Post: 37% were at the national standard or 'working at greater depth'.

## 5. **Outcomes for the adults**

As well as the outcomes for the children we are interested in the experience of the Teaching assistants' who deliver the programme in schools. This year we worked with Dr Jonathan Barnes who carried out a year long study with 7 teaching assistants. The full study can be found at [Investigating the impact of Speech Bubbles on school support staff by Jonathan Barnes — Speech Bubbles](#). After carrying out three structured conversations with each of the participating TAs through the school year he concluded that working alongside a drama practitioner and participating in the training, evaluations and Speech Bubbles sessions had a positive impact on TAs:

### **Positivity/Personal and Social Wellbeing**

Evidence from this research indicated that the training and actual sessions consistently provided affirmative experiences of acceptance, kindness, trust, collaboration, empathy and fairness. TAs recognised these values as constructive influences in their own lives and those of children with SLC difficulties.

### **Self-Efficacy/Confidence**

Poor confidence developed in childhood can remain for a lifetime. Several TAs expressed a lack of self-efficacy in aspects like imagination, creativity, relaxing or the ability to be playful. However, confidence in such aspects grew quickly through practical engagement in SB and was reported by each of the 7 volunteer respondents. Fear of 'making a fool of myself' was absent by the second or third sessions for all

*If SB had been available to me in my school, I know it would have made a big difference, it would have helped me leaps and bounds. Speech Bubbles is a massive advantage and a benefit; it is a precious thing.'*

### **Creativity/Fun**

Despite not being asked directly about creativity, many remarked that SB provoked creativity in all concerned, and was 'the best part of the week', the activity they most looked forward to or that they felt most important.

*...it completely lifts the mood, and we just have real fun and its good for everyone's mental health, adults and children*

## **6. Reflections**

At the end of the school year, we hosted face to face evaluation sessions with the drama practitioners and TAs who had been delivering the programme. As well as an opportunity to share the successes of the programme we wanted to know what had been difficult this year and what areas we could improve upon.

### **Getting teachers/rest of school more involved.**

We recognise that there can be a disconnect between the class teacher and the Speech Bubbles sessions. We will:

- Introduce a CPD programme. This will be developed with support of PHF funding and will involve teachers, speech therapists and drama folk in its creation. It will be made available to every school for all their KS1 staff. It will aim to promote a 'creative, communication friendly classroom'. This is fully funded and will include a teacher's resource pack.
- Invite KS1 teachers to initial set up meeting. Invite teachers to sessions.
- Return to Parent/Carer sessions and innovate additional ways of sharing the practice E.G. Bring a friend session, whole class demonstrations.

### **Schools understanding the need for consistent staffing and space.**

Working in a space that is too small, too large or is constantly interrupted impacts on the experience for the children and adds stress to the adults. We will:

- Use the checklist of 'essential requirements' in school set-up meetings. It is in the updated Operations Manual for use by all theatre partners.

### **Schools better understand referral criteria**

In most cases schools refer appropriately to Speech Bubbles, where they haven't fully understood the criteria, they are likely to refer children for perceived behavioural reasons, this is detrimental to the programme. We will:

- Encourage schools to involve TAs in referrals.
- Continue to emphasise that the programme is not designed as an intervention to manage perceived behavioural challenges.
- Give out a paper copy of the referral guidance at 'set up' meetings.
- Encourage schools not to schedule against PE/Playtime, for many children with communication needs PE/Playtime are the highlights of their school day.
- Reminding schools that groups can be mixed year 1 and year 2.

### **More resources**

There was a general recognition that Speech Bubbles key resource is children's imaginations. However, it was felt that the project could benefit from some additional resources. We will:

- Develop and trial a set of story location images that could be used to support children who struggle to tell a story.
- Trial a more accessible version of the weekly observation sheet in selected schools.

### **Support for practitioners**

Speech Bubbles is delivered by a predominantly freelance team of drama practitioners. It has been an extraordinarily difficult couple of years to be a freelancer. To further support this team, we will:

- Increase opportunities for them to shadow each other's sessions.
- Seek a digital platform for networking and professional development.
- Refocus support visits to focus on and nurture the TA and drama practitioner relationship.
- Increase support to practitioners in understanding neurodiversity and working with children who are selectively mute.

## 7. Future plans

Once again, we have seen significant progress for the children participating in Speech Bubbles, and this despite a very disrupted year. We can see that there is a benefit to also offering a slightly shorter programme for a smaller number of children where schools identify their communication need in the autumn term and that Bounce Back offer will be made available across the partner network.

We are delighted to announce new three-year funding from Paul Hamlyn Foundation, this significant funding will enable us to design a Continued Professional Development (CPD) programme for teachers in the participating primary schools. This CPD will be developed with the support of Teachers, teaching assistants, speech and language therapists, drama practitioners and initial teacher trainers and will be trialled in the spring and summer terms.

We have two new theatre partners joining us in the partner network: **Bounce Theatre**, Wandsworth and **Mercury Theatre**, Colchester. Mercury Theatre are supporting us to develop a Speech Bubbles model suitable for working in smaller, rural schools with support of the Royal Society of Arts and the ROH Bridge.

Finally, we have been working with Warda Farah from Language Waves to develop a new training video that will be rolled out in September. The video supports our practice in truly listening to every child and links that to concepts of Linguistic Justice and Linguistic Rights.

## 8. Thank you

To the theatre partners, schools, drama practitioners, teaching assistants and the children that made the 2021-2022 Speech Bubbles year so delightful and full of stories.

To the Speech Bubbles trustees and advisory group who have provided unwavering support and positivity throughout the year.

And to the funders, both new and old, who make the work possible. The following have funded the Speech Bubbles CIO charity and the work in Bromley, Bexley, Lambeth, and Croydon. Our partners report separately on the funders in each of their areas.

