

Improving children's social and emotional health by truly listening to their stories  
Dr Jonathan Barnes    Canterbury Christ Church University



Speech Bubbles (SB) is a drama-based programme designed to address barriers in speech, language and communication (SLC) amongst 6 and 7 year olds (1,2). It is founded on evidence that hearing and honouring children's invented stories provokes their participation and builds skills in confidence, listening and Oracy (3). Over a 30 week programme, groups of 10 children with SLC difficulties tell and act out their stories, sympathetically led by trained theatre practitioners (TP) and teaching assistants (TA). In 2019 SB worked with 1260 children in 64 schools.

Schools make compelling claims about SB's effectiveness (4). The programme, evaluated in 2015, suggested that about 80% of children made measurable SLC and behaviour improvements (5), but there has been no study of longer term impact until the pilot evaluation reported on below.

Six 11 year olds from a London primary school, volunteered to share memories of their involvement with SB four or five years ago. In their first years of schooling these children experienced a wide range of challenges: English was their second or third language, they

had other learning difficulties, were painfully shy, mute or unable to control language. In the words of one:

*....I sat in the corner like yeah they used to always say to me like, 'put your hand up if you have an answer,' but I never used to do it because I was too shy I was going to get it wrong....(Child 1)*

SB claims to promote confidence and involvement among such children, so that learning, listening and contributing can flourish. SB sessions follow a similar pattern:

1. Ten children with SLC difficulties arrive in a room with a TA.
2. In a circle they chant with actions SB's binding values: kindness/gentleness, turn-taking, good listening and good acting,
3. They:
  - 'throw' their names into an imaginary bucket in the centre of the circle, using funny, quiet or loud voices,
  - join in warm-up/imagination exercises to get into theatre-making mode,
  - are reminded of the features of a good story: characters, a place, a happening and a 'good ending',
  - practice scenes from the week's chosen story, deciding with voices and bodies how to make jungles, cities, shops, castles, unicorns, dragons etc,
  - make a masking-tape 'story square' stage on the floor,
  - listen as TP slowly reads the week's story, line by line,
  - act out the story in the story square - different children taking lead roles in each section of the story.
4. One child stays behind to tell the TP next week's story.
5. The story is written down verbatim – no corrections, additions or prompts.

All interviewees remembered SB enthusiastically. They were videoed and their words transcribed as they described their experiences. Quotations capture the impact of children's involvement:

*...at first I wasn't really listening, It felt like it was going to take years to get to my turn, but ...I realised that everyone was listening to me so that I should listen back to them because they're giving me their time and attention and I am giving them mine. (Child 5)'*

*'I liked the square - no I didn't actually like it- I loved it, because we could explain our ideas and make up our own stories and express ourselves ...' (Child 4)*

Children particularly remarked on confidence built through the SB sessions:

*SB upgraded myself to be confident in class and out of class. When I am doing a question I [now] can get up in front of the whole class and answer it without thinking 'I don't want to do this anymore,' – it's like sharing your opinion because it's your question or your answer – it made me understand and speak out.' (Child 3)*

They remembered the warm-ups and individual stories in great detail, frequently using words like *imagination, emotion* and *expression*:

*...now I want to listen more things and learn, I have more imagination now than before and use it in any type of writing, it's improved my writing. (Child 5)*

All claimed improvements to listening skills, speaking and participation and linked these to developments in social and personal well-being:

*... you should do good listening to them because you want them to listen to you....[SB] made me listen to others in class and share my ideas more, put my hand up more, share your ideas more with everybody. (Child 2)*

They ascribed improved relationships to SB too. Often using the pronoun *we*, children said SB had helped them become, *'happy to speak'* or *'have fun with others,'* in class or

playground, *'SB made me talk more and have conversations with people,'* (Child 4). All remembered specific SB values, specially singling out the importance of being *gentle, kind, sharing or taking turns.*

Each child illustrated significant changes in their lives triggered by SB:

*'I was always the quiet one, now I am always laughing and loud.'*(Child 2)

*We really like drama or acting now (Child 3 and Child 6) .*

School records show that over their primary years these children with SLC difficulties made significant progress in confidence, storytelling, listening, relationships and participation. It would be wrong, however, to claim these improvements resulted purely from SB.

Numbers were small and not necessarily representative, children self-selected, but they unequivocally *believed* that SB had made all the difference to them. These volunteers had constructed narratives that underpinned their perceptions of good social and educational health. Their recollections consistently described anxious beginnings in school, an atmosphere of security established by SB and imagination, activity, fun, friendship. Shared values, story-making and story-sharing linked to it. Having their stories truly heard had changed them. Each autobiographical narrative culminated in eloquent descriptions of a contributing, socially and psychologically healthy self.

This pilot evaluation raises important questions for researchers:

- How far should teachers help children construct positive narratives about their mental and social health?
- Are the arts particularly conducive to provoking and sustaining such narratives?
- What is the relationship between children's positive narratives and their long-term social/psychological health?

Dr Jonathan Barnes

Canterbury Christ Church University

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