



# **Promoting social and personal well-being in 5 – 7 year olds through the ‘Speech Bubbles’ drama project**

**A Report by Dr Jonathan Barnes**



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This report provides background to a research paper published in the *Royal Society for Public Health Journal* (Barnes, 2012). The RSPH paper examines the well-being impacts of a drama based intervention designed to support young children with speech and communication difficulties. It analyses two terms’ work of the Speech Bubble’s project in two London primary schools, seeking to describe and discover what underlies the apparent educational successes of the programme designed by the London Bubble Theatre company. This report focusses upon the mental and social health policy behind the programme and more fully describes its wider benefits. The focus on well-being arises from increasing evidence that those with unaddressed language, speech and communication problems go on to have complex health and social needs in later life.

### 1.1 Public policy and well-being

Happiness matters. As greater wealth fails to deliver increased general well-being to already rich countries, interest in alternative routes to personal and national happiness has increased. Psychologists have for some time observed and publicised strong links between personal happiness and health, longevity, or success (see Seligman, 2004, Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, Fredrickson, 2009). In many studies (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) happiness is linked with greater economic fortune and many successful modern companies have sought to take advantage of its productivity benefits. Personal fulfilment and joy in life, however, offer much more than monetary success – they are fundamental goals in themselves (UN, 2012)

A small, poor and little-known Asian country has led the way since the 1970s in focusing state attention on happiness. Bhutan now measures ‘Gross National Happiness’ (GNH) every four years (Bhutan Gov, 2012, website). GNH is a calculation of the sustainable environmental, social, psychological, spiritual and physical health of a nation. Bhutan’s measures include data on individual’s experience of such elements as: mental well-being, stress, selfishness, anger, calmness, contentment and generosity. Major political gatherings in Brazil, Canada, USA, Scandinavia, Britain and the United Nations have pushed well-being high on the public agenda (Communities and Local Gov., 2009; Cameron, 2010, NOS, 2011). The UK now has a ‘health, work and well-being programme’, (HSE, 2008) and England has developed a ‘Local Index of Child Well-Being,’ (CLG, 2009) combining material wealth indicators with those on health, education, crime, housing, environment and children at risk, to rate the well-being of each local authority.

The well-being of young people is a key issue. The UK appears to fall behind many similar countries in the reported happiness of its children. British, and particularly English, children’s poor ratings in general health behaviour (WHO, 2004, 2008, 2012), mental health, (Collishaw, et al. 2004), self-reported happiness (Layard and Dunn, 2009; Barnardos, 2010), social and family relationships (UNICEF, 2007, 2011) have persuaded successive governments to act on child well-being. Health, education and social services (HMG, 2004), have predictably been the focus of advice and legislation, but governments have also looked toward creative (Robinson, 1999: POAH, 2011), cultural (Ajegbo, 2007: Henley, 2012) and citizenship lobbies (DfE 2000: HC, 2007; Citizenship Foundation, 2012), to provide the essential ingredients to improve the experience of children.

Economic indicators remain important in mapping a thriving nation. Within a society aiming to be led by moral values, economic surveys will expose inequalities and guide towards building a better world (NEF, 2009; 2011). Enquiry into the summer riots of 2011 in England (Singh, 2012) for example, refocused attention on links between areas of deprivation, and poor education with high degrees of stress, hopelessness and alienation, (see also Prince's Trust, 2009; Layard and Dunn, 2009). Poor children suffer disproportionately in health and happiness. Evidence suggests that the lack of choice and control which arise from economic disadvantage, negatively affect a wide range of life outcomes amongst the poor (Marmot, 2010, 2012; DfE, 2011). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2004, 2008, 2012) a child in Denmark, Holland or Finland is more likely to be happy than one in England, the USA or Romania. These national differences are not explained by differences in wealth, but in the World Health Organisation's view, by the inequalities and attitudes of the societies in which they live.

It may be no coincidence that countries with high child well-being also have positive and inclusive attitudes to the arts, culture and infants (Action for Children, 2009). While reports on children and society suggest involvement in creative and cultural life is essential in building positive identities (NACCCE, 1999; Roberts, 2006; Ajegbo, 2007; Henley, 2012; Tickell, 2012; Singh, 2012), the arts and culture in education have suffered progressive cuts and low priorities. A similar mismatch between public policy and learned advice relates to provision for the very young.

Amongst the first cuts resulting from economic downturn in England was Early Years education (Guardian, website, 2011). Aside from the closure of Sure Start centres, expert support in pre-schools has become more thinly spread (see Tickell, 2012). The loss of these essential workers around the child has provided extra stress for both teachers and children.

## **1.2 Health background**

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has reported on the health related behaviour of school-aged children (11 – 16 years) since 1984. Starting with just five countries (Austria, Denmark, England, Finland and Norway) the four yearly 'Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children,' Reports (HBSC), have provided rich data on the lives of children in increasing numbers of countries. In 2012 the HBSC reported on 43 'developed', mainly European or North American countries and represents a wide range of cultures and life styles. All recognise the healthy development of children as central to economic and social progress; all understand that health is not simply a physical attribute.

Health is defined by the United Nations as, '*a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*' (WHO 1946, 1992). Health in this definition has physical, social, psychological, environmental and spiritual aspects. Indeed Seedhouse (2001) argues it involves everything that provides 'the foundations for achievement'. In continuing UK programmes such as the Healthy Schools initiative (DfE, 2012a) holistic definitions of health take policy well beyond dietary and exercise guidance towards recommendations on curricular and pedagogical approaches affecting every part of school life. But healthy development is not the experience of every child living in the UK. A recent report commented:

....a staggering 41% of children are NOT achieving a good level of development.... we are doing very badly indeed. Poor early child development and socioeconomic disadvantage predict poor performance through children's whole school careers, (Marmot, 2012).

Healthy development is closely related to personal and social wellness. In England, for example, legislation and guidance for the health and well-being of young children all regard multiagency involvement as essential (DfE, 2004; DCSF, 2008; Communities and Local Gov, 2009; D o H, 2011; Tickell, 2012). The same range of viewpoints are represented at ministerial level in the cross departmental group on cultural education recommended by Henley (DCMS, 2012).

Good health rests on healthy communication, a recent Canadian report on child mental health stated:

Positive mental health outcomes are associated with environments that are supportive, and with good communication with adults and peers in those environments, (Public Health Agency Canada, 2011)

The Speech Bubbles programme was devised to support the development of speech and communication in young children who had displayed significant difficulties in this area.

### **1.3 Education background.**

Education research has followed a similar trajectory to health in recognising the positive and generative impact of security and other aspects of well-being. Gradual moves towards more emotionally sensitive, holistic and inclusive definitions of intelligence, knowledge and learning, starting with The Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) have accompanied widespread approval of social, participatory and active approaches to education. At the same time neuroscientific evidence (eg Damasio, 1995, 2003; Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007; Geake, 2010) has confirmed that the emotional engagement engendered by creative and cultural pursuits is essential to learning. Education research has similarly stressed the vital role of social, emotional, inclusive, participatory and creative approaches (see Rogoff, 2003; Jeffrey, 2006; Gardner, 2005, Alexander 2010).

Inclusion has been a key concept in education in recent times. Education for creativity and creative teaching are a significant part of this trend in English education. The report of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999) established the democratic and inclusive tone. It also engendered the influential 'Creative Partnerships' programme which ran throughout England between 2002 and 2011. A series of reports, case studies, books and research papers confirmed the educational and social value of inclusive creative collaborations and approaches (see Roberts, 2006, Craft et al 2008; HC 2008, Cremin, et al, 2009; Alexander, 2010; Henley, 2012). Inclusive ideals also underpin evidence-based guidance on behaviour (Tod and Ellis, 2009), values and whole school policies (Booth and Ainscow, 2012), and language development (DCSF, 2008; Gooch, 2011). But the academic and cultural evidence has been counterbalanced by increased calls for accountability and raised standards in 'the basics' of English, mathematics and science.

A proliferation of assessment-led and inspection-heavy policies have followed. Successive governments have been highly influenced by the reports from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) which compares aspects of mathematics, science and language learning (PISA, website) between nations. These reports show a worrying decline in UK performance compared to that of many Asian and Scandinavian countries, but do not measure achievements in creative, arts-based or cultural education. A 'return' to the teaching of 'facts', 'knowledge' and specific skills has dominated the political rhetoric. Words like: standards, excellence, challenge, rigour, measures and targets characterise the language of education legislation. 'Therapeutic' and 'child-centred' approaches have become classed as 'dangerous' or simply 'wrong' (Hirsch, 1989; Woodhead, 2003; Furadi, 2009; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; BBC, 2011).

In the context of Early Years education, the emphasis in language and communication has been upon attention, phonic knowledge, writing, clear speaking and the development of literacy skills before the age of five (QCA, 2008). The coalition government has further tightened these requirements by stressing the importance of grammatical knowledge for example with regard to speaking:

children express themselves effectively, showing awareness of listeners' needs. They use past, present and future forms accurately when talking about events that have happened or are to happen in the future. They develop their own narratives and explanations by connecting ideas or events. (DfE 2012b)

Prime early learning goals in other areas of communication are identified as follows:

**Listening and attention:** children listen attentively in a range of situations. They listen to stories, accurately anticipating key events and respond to what they hear with relevant comments, questions or actions. They give their attention to what others say and respond appropriately, while engaged in another activity.

**Understanding:** children follow instructions involving several ideas or actions. They answer 'how' and 'why' questions about their experiences and in response to stories or events. (DfE, 2012b).

These slimmed down requirements for the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework will lead to a 2013 national curriculum in language with greater emphasis on securing 'the basics' of spelling, grammar, punctuation, recitation, reading, oracy and writing. Its aims are likely to be to:

- read easily, fluently and with good understanding
- develop the habit of reading widely and often for both pleasure and information
- acquire a wide vocabulary, an understanding of grammar and knowledge of linguistic conventions for reading, writing and spoken language
- appreciate our rich and varied literary heritage
- write clearly, accurately and coherently, adapting their language and style in and for a range of contexts, purposes and audiences
- use discussion in order to learn; they should be able to elaborate and explain clearly their understanding and ideas
- be competent in the arts of speaking and listening, making formal presentations, demonstrating to others and participating in debate. (DfE, 2012c)

Motivating concepts like: creativity, imagination, meaningful activity, context and relevance are missing from the proposed legislation. This does not mean that creative, collaborative and imaginative approaches are no longer important or supported. Many see the welcome rhetoric of returning control to teachers as encouraging schools to make their own decisions as to what will motivate children towards these laudable aims. For disadvantaged children proposed legislation undoubtedly raises the bar and schools will need to seek out a wide range of cost effective, sustainable, capacity-building approaches to support the development such children and their teachers. Facts, skills, emotion, choice and experience have always been central to education policy and practice. As Alexander (2010) has eloquently reminded us, tendencies to polarise the education debate have a long history and are unhelpful. The Speech Bubbles programme offers an important case study in attempting to unite skills, knowledge and excellence with feelings, engagement and freedom. Such leadership will be vital to schools and authorities seeking ways to move forward.

Good communication is fundamental to all progress and processes of learning. It is crucial to the successful socialisation and identity formation of the very young (DCSF, 2008 a & b; Nutbrown, 2012). In Britain figures suggest that 50% of children face some kind of treatable communication difficulty (I CAN, 2006), and governments are well aware that addressing speech, language and communication needs is a priority. Economic difficulties have however resulted in decisions to reduce funding for external agencies supporting young children (counsellors, psychologists, speech, behaviour, music and art therapists). Opportunities to develop and extend speech and language have declined in schools as a result of such

cutbacks. Schools and local authorities must now seek low-cost, high-impact programmes to address a growing need in times of increased financial hardship.

#### **1.4 Arts background.**

Austerity policies hit the arts disproportionately. Public grants are difficult to secure and yet arts are hailed as powerful forces in regenerating economically deprived areas. Companies working with communities continue to prove that arts make a difference (for example Arts Council, 2012), but communities must increasingly look to 'Big Society' charity to support arts initiatives. Encouraged by the success of Creative Partnerships (Creativity, Culture and Education, 2009), artists have looked to schools for patronage but depend upon sympathetic head teachers. With arts in teacher education often absent or seriously depleted (see Rogers, 1999, 2003, Downing et al. 2003) and continued pressures on schools to meet literacy, numeracy and science targets, the supply of head teachers *likely* to spend on the arts diminishes.

The participation of *all* is the bedrock of UK national curriculum legislation for arts. Education research in music, art, dance and drama similarly stresses the value of the practical involvement of all children in the processes and questions central to the arts (eg Roberts, 2006; Desailly, 2012). In the field of story and drama Vivienne Paley is a notable example of this tradition.

Paley champions storytelling and fantasy play as key to intellectual and social growth in children. She notes that whilst most early years' practitioners see play as fundamental to learning, US, UK and Canadian education systems progressively shorten the time that children have to play. Paley argues children need dedicated time, '... to create the scenery and develop the skills for the [ ] ever-changing dramas,' through which they come to terms with their world, (Paley 2004). When asked to use drama to help children with communication difficulties, the London Bubble Theatre (LB) turned to Paley's approaches for guidance. Her research and writing founded on children's words and imaginations, modelled a fully inclusive and secure structure within which the choices, imaginations and language of children could thrive.

#### **1.5 A Speech Bubbles session**

The 'Speech Bubbles' team developed a framework designed to provoke authentic, fantasy play in children in years 1 and 2 (6/7 year olds). Through this play, channelled into a series of dramatic 'plays' performed each session by supporting adults and referred children, participants are gently guided into being kind to each other, speaking out, listening, expressing in facial and body movements, collaboration and taking turns. Resulting increased social and personal confidence has shown itself in notable educational benefits. In 2011, 78% of referred pupils showed teacher assessed improvement in Learning, Speaking and Listening, (36% demonstrated what teachers called a 'clear improvement' and 9% a 'striking improvement'). Equally important in a school context is that according to class teachers, 70% of SB participants showed improvement in emotional and conduct behaviour, 26% having clear improvement and 13% striking improvement (Annand, 2011).

The weekly-repeated SB sessions were observably fun and meaningful - intended to support and encourage rather than constrain creativity. The Speech Bubbles framework is best summarised in the simple table below composed from observations and children's own commentaries (*Figure 1*). Children arrive and form a circle together with their learning mentors, perhaps a teacher and a theatre practitioner. With variations between drama practitioners, the activities follow the same order each week of term:

Figure 1: A typical Speech Bubbles session

<b>Speech Bubbles Activity</b>	<b>....in children's words</b>
<b>Ten children plus TA arrive to meet facilitator</b>	<i>We just come straight in and make a circle (C)</i>
<b>Good morning/hello game:</b> everyone walks across the circle and greets another	<i>'Hello Sadie,' I say and she says, 'Hello Ismail,' (T)</i>
<b>Chanting values:</b> with hand actions	<i>'In speech bubbles we do good listening, we take turns, and we are kind to each other.'</i>
<b>Name in bucket game:</b> everyone projects their name into an imaginary bucket	<i>'its not a real bucket it's a pretend bucket (E) 'We throw our names in the bucket loud, quietly and silly.' (H) '...sometimes you can do it in a funny way - Jaaaaaaaaanel.' (J)</i>
<b>Bubbles game:</b> everyone blows an invisible bubble and slowly and carefully steps inside, cleans the walls so they can see and floats up.	<i>. 'They blow the bubble and the bubbles start getting bigger and bigger (T) – they are floating around,' If they touch each other you'll go inside and they'll just pop.'(H)</i>
<b>Preparatory exercises, Soundscapes':</b> everyone practises key characters, events or pieces of scenery in the day's story	<i>They making Stirling's story and my one, they're pretending there was snow on the floor, they carefully walked and then they fall down...(T)  That's the sound of swords crashing together, not snakes (C)</i>
<b>Marking out the story square:</b> practitioner makes a rectangular space with tape where the story will be acted out.	<i>'its where we do our acting in, (J) '...he (Adam) was putting the story square on the floor (J) 'People act out their characters,' (Ja) , ...Sellotape on the floor...its like a square and we need a big square so we can do our story. (H)</i>
<b>Storytelling and acting:</b> practitioner slowly reads out the day's story, verbatim, Individuals or groups are called to act parts and scenery.	<i>Once ... there lived a king and a princess but the queen did not come back until it was December or November. The queen did come from Africa and her grandmother died that's why she's gone to Africa. And the queen had forgotten a thing that was really important, she had forgotten her phone.(E)</i>
<b>Whoosh!</b> Instruction mid-performance for the players to leave the story square and a new group enter.	<i>'when Adam says "whoooosh!" then we've got to get out of the square and sit down.' (H )</i>
<b>'Washing off,' characters</b>	<i>'They're washing all the dirt- the characters off. (T) they were pretending to have a shower.'(T)</i>
<b>Hedgehog feedback:</b>	<i>'Then we say to the hedgehog what do we enjoy today.' (H)</i>
<b>Telling next week's story:</b> Two children stay and tell their story to facilitator or assistant. who writes exactly what they say.	<i>we take turns, .....Stas has our names in his book and after we make all of it up, we actually act what we told the last day, whatever we say they write it down (J) she writes it down, so the next time we come here some can act it out -, she writes what we say.(C) They tell the person a story and then next SB they act it out. (A)</i>
<b>TAs and facilitators assess each child for developments in, turn taking, listening, acting and kindness</b>	

## 2. PURPOSE OF STUDY

This research was conducted against the background in policy, arts practice, education and health research summarised above. Child mental and social health, its relationship to play and security and to developing communication skills is the focus. The educational effectiveness of the Speech Bubbles programme has already been reviewed along with the literature on school-based story/drama workshops (LB, 2009). The methodologies used to evaluate developments in children's communication and classify the pedagogical skills of practitioners rightly concentrated on adult views and interpretations. It sought adult answers to adult questions underpinned by requirements to show value for money and progress towards adult-imposed targets in literacy.

By contrast, my research, funded by the Sidney DeHaan Research Centre for Arts and Health, sought to represent the voice of the child and was centred on health aspects of children's lives not currently subject to education targets. Adult views remained important, but questions were designed to elicit evidence of the child's inner experience. The objectives were to:

- Visually identify possible physical indicators of child mental well-being in a group of 5 – 7 year olds attending small referred drama groups
- Visually and aurally identify possible physical and verbal indicators of child social well-being of a group of 5 – 7 year olds attending small referred drama groups
- Gather evidence from children and adults on the role of structure in provoking both security and creativity in a group of 5 – 7 year olds attending small referred drama groups
- Gather child-centred evidence of improvements in the communication skills of a group of 5 – 7 year olds attending small referred drama groups

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Measuring well-being

Well-being is a relative term. Carol Ryff (1989) suggests well-being consists of six dimensions – self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Ryff's analysis however focuses on individual rather than social, cultural or moral factors and I have argued elsewhere (Barnes 2012) that sustainable feelings of well-being must include a sense of involvement in alleviating the suffering of others. In this paper I take well-being to mean a state of flourishing involving indications of personal interpersonal and moral happiness. It involves calm relaxation, questioning, visible enjoyment, excitement, playfulness, satisfaction in another's happiness or pleasure in another's company. Interpretation of these positive states varies across cultures, but when children experience well-being, it tends to be recognisable across cultures by its physical characteristics (see Ekman, 2004):

In the psychologist's laboratory Fredrickson and others have worked on measuring well-being, or what she calls 'positivity', in other ways. Feelings of happiness have been deliberately induced in research subjects and in that mood they have been tested for a variety of creative, social, physical, and emotional characteristics. In each case Fredrickson has found a broadened repertoire of physical, mental and social skills in positive moods than in the same subjects suffering temporary induced negative moods. Year of such experiments have resulted in Fredrickson's, *Broaden and Build theory of*



*positive emotions*, (Fredrickson, 2009) in which she postulates that positive emotions result in better personal and social functioning all round.

As interest in well-being has grown, assessment techniques have multiplied. Laevers and others at Leuven University for example, developed five-point scales to measure both well-being and involvement in preschool children. Variants of these scales have coloured the thinking of many early years professionals since the 1990s (Laevers, 1994). I have claimed (Barnes 2011) that the prose descriptions of body language, facial expression and social manifestations of well-being apply equally to much older students. But other measures exist (Young Foundation, 2012). Environmental judgements related to well-being have been pioneered in the USA particularly through the Environmental Rating Scales (eg Hames, 1996).

The UK government's stated commitment to well-being has led to the development of new measures (National Office of Statistics, 2009, 2011) which imply wider definitions and more social characteristics than Laevers. Locally authority figures on deprivation and health provide the well-being data rather than practitioners observations. Children's self-report has formed the measures developed by charities and authorities concerned with their welfare (Barnados, 2007, Layard and Dunn, 2009; NPC., 2009, Pen Green, 2012; New Zealand Education, 2012).

### **3.2 Self- report and children**

Self-report is unaccountably considered suspect by many education researchers. '*We have been taught to treat such said accounts as untrustworthy, even...untrue,*' remarks Bruner (1990, p.16). Yet in health and child welfare, the child's view has long been taken seriously. Government appointees, (eg. Children's Commissioner, 2012), research (eg Matheson, 2003), legislation, (HMG, 2004), pressure groups or government-sponsored reports (Alexander, 2010; Tickell, 2012) now regularly rely on evidence from children. Although denial, repression, avoidance, unconscious motivation and deliberate lies may be part of what is reported to be true, this educational research rests on belief in the child until contradicted by evidence to the contrary.

## **4. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION**

### **4.1 Who participated?**

The research was conducted in terms one and two of a three-term programme, delivered by LB supported by the London Borough of Southwark Pupil Development Centre (PDC) in the school year 2011-2012. The researcher attended three training days for teachers and LSAs representing 12 schools involved in the Speech Bubbles programme. The Assistant Director of LB identified two schools (one new to SB and one with two years' experience) led by two different theatre practitioners for the study. Each school referred two groups of ten pupils to the Speech Bubbles (SB) programme. Groups were accompanied by a learning support assistant (LSA), but class teachers were not directly involved. On two occasions I met with parents of some of the referred children.

All SB children were perceived as having communication difficulties. Some individuals were very shy, unable to contribute in class unless with a close friend, some had very quiet voices and formed only short sentences. Others were boisterous, unable to take turns or listen to others. Some were selective mutes, or diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, or with severe/moderate difficulties in speaking or understanding English. All were united in facing significant barriers to normal communication for their age.

Towards the end of the research eight children *not* involved in the SB programme watched a video of a SB session with representatives from the SB group. The SB children explained what was going on in the video and their conversations were recorded.

## 4.2 Approach to data collection

Methods of data collection and analysis were largely qualitative and interpretative falling within the field of participant action research. Training sessions were attended and contributed to by the researcher and research notes were taken with permission. Notes were made available to adult participants and transcripts were scrutinised for themes and categories in the manner of grounded research, (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The researcher participated fully in each SB session and each was videoed with the permission of TAs, teachers and children's families. Any disclosures or concerns in sessions immediately activated school child protection policies. Using the videos 12 randomly-chosen children were analysed against an adapted Leuven Well-Being scale (L-WB), (Laevers, 1994) (see Appendix 1). This scale employs five verbal statements of variations in demeanour, activity and relationships amongst early-years children (see Fig. 2). Its accessible language and visual/relational focus made L-WB appropriate for this study.

Session recordings were edited to four-minute video-summaries and later used to generate interaction amongst children in which two SB children explained to non-SB classmates what happened in a session. Researcher contributions were limited to, 'What was happening there?' or 'What's that about?' at roughly 30-second intervals. The dialogues were transcribed and anonymised to provide the children's' perspective and are shown by italics throughout this report. L-WB gradings using the same videos were checked by non-participant teachers to test validity.

These videos also prompted conversations with adults involved in SB and resultant transcripts were shared with participants.

The sources of data therefore were:

- observation and occasional note-taking during or immediately after a session
- video recording taken from a fixed point, later edited to 4 minute summaries
- Still photographs of children in action
- Adult perceptions of the significance of children's' movements, expressions and body language
- Children's' own perceptions of the meaning of their movements, expressions and body language
- Semi-structured conversations.
- 

All conversations were recorded and participants sent copies of both the transcript and the excerpts I wished to use. I held brief recorded conversations directly after the SB sessions. with:

- drama practitioners
- learning support assistants
- class teachers
- class teachers who had not seen a SB session before

### 4.3 Data Management

Photographs, videos and real-time observations were analysed using a grid based upon Ferre Laevers' well-being scales (Laevers, 1994) (see Appendix 1). Randomly chosen, individual children were assessed three times against a five point scale and any visual progress in well-being noted. To test validity decisions made against the scale were compared with those of class teachers and independent assessors using the same visual material, but who had not met the children.

Transcripts, conversation and research notes taken from meetings and training sessions were scrutinised for themes and categories in the manner of grounded research. Grounded Research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), offered a way of interrogating transcripts and generating theory from the data itself. My research conforms to grounded research theory in that the proposals offered at the end of this article:

- (a) closely fit the context in which they will be used
- (b) are understandable by anyone involved in the area
- (c) are general enough '*to be applicable to a multitude of diverse daily situations,*'
- (d) allow any user significant control over the process so that they may fit, '*situations as they change through time,*' (Ibid., p. 237).

### 5. FINDINGS:

From conversations and comments during training sessions I identified themes and categories. Common themes highlighted by adults were:

- Job satisfaction (highlighted in pink),
- children's behaviour (highlighted in blue),
- children's communication (highlighted in yellow),
- children's confidence (highlighted in orange)
- Structure (highlighted in green),
- School curriculum (underlined)

The themes were raised in different conversational contexts identified as 'Categories' as follows:

- Values /Beliefs (V) (B)
- Key stories (Ks)
- School issues (SI)

In staff training sessions for twelve schools, teachers, LSAs, parents and PDC members consistently claimed that the SB sessions had caused major improvements in behaviour and communication in the vast majority of referred children. Exceptions were one child whose behaviour difficulties were such that the school decided to exclude him from sessions and some initial difficulties with behaviour in one group. Although the success was generally high with children who displayed mute behaviour one child remained mute after two terms, but had become much more confident with peers developing new and supportive friendships according to a theatre practitioner (RN, 09.02.12).

When asked what behaviours typified a child with communication difficulties LSAs and teachers listed the following:

Biting, launching objects across the classroom, wetting themselves, negative attention seeking,

asking irrelevant questions or giving irrelevant answers, lonely/solitary, frustrated, depressed and anxious appearance/activity, constant interruption, aggressive, over-dominant behaviour, stutters, late responses to something said or asked. Saying things that appear to be random, frequent crying, invading other's physical or verbal space, hiding under things, spinning, making weird sounds, lack of friends, telling on people, limited vocabulary, parent's and own lack of confidence in the language (RN, 15.09.11)

On examination, the communication improvements credited to SB fell into seven categories: confidence, vocabulary, emotional engagement, fluency, turn taking/giving, empathy and length and complexity of interactions.

## **5.1 Improvements among children with communication difficulties**

### *(a) Verbal and physical confidence*

The social environment into which SB children entered was one of warmth, calm, acceptance and security. These characteristics were noted in each observation and were also highlighted in conversation with TAs. Most adults consulted commented on the improved physical and verbal confidence of children and this may have resulted at least partly from the specially supportive environment which characterised SB sessions. In observed sessions children were noted to transfer similar qualities of kindness and consideration to each other. Some teachers remarked that positive change that transferred to classroom behaviour occurred for some children within two SB sessions. Hannah for example

*'used to cry at everything, on a daily basis, if her coat fell down, if she lost something, but since Speech Bubbles though she still occasionally gets upset, its much less and what really surprises me is that she has this massive voice, she volunteered for the Christmas play and was one of the first....much better at acting, much more confident'* (CT, RN 09.02.12)

Another child had been referred because of shyness and difficulties in speaking English. As he watched the video featuring himself, wreathed in smiles he explained to his classmates:

*I'm just standing pretending (he laughs) he's pretending that there is snow and she (referring to Janel) fall down (laughs again). They making a story of Stirling's story and my one, I can't remember anything about Stirling's story, but I can remember the snow [gently hits his head in mock frustration when he says he can't remember]. We got two stories they are pretending there was snow on the floor, they carefully walked and the they fall down....the road's really slippery sometimes [Enrico, speaking very loudly and excitedly smiling broadly, wants to answer every question and make comments at every clip of video, has to be asked to be patient whilst others have their say]*

When he watched his own story being acted out he commented enthusiastically:

*There was a boy and he thinks, [correcting himself]... he thought...that he going to the race, he quickly dress up and he quickly bet when he's with another boy, he said I think I'm going to have a race, yeah, and then he got 2 cars and one said ready, go and then they both go. The boy passed him and quickly just off I went past him and then I wined and every [body] got round in a circle and he wined. I could remember that...a bit I thought it was Fabio, but it was Hartley [gently hits his head in mock frustration]). Who is win would get this thing he won the [a trophy]....I think it's a special car it's a black one, I got a motorbike a speed one, but it's a sports car, but I don't have gloves [Enrico, smiling and excited throughout].*

Fine and gross motor activities formed part of each observed session. Fine skills in sound production were developed in some of the 'soundscape' exercises, where children created subtle sounds to conjure up a forest or busy motorway. Fine finger movements were practiced and developed in several of the warm-up or cool-down games played. Similarly the physicality of the plays and group construction of body-sculpture scenery, like castles,

deserts, forests, shopping streets and stables, helped refine gross motor skills in these young children.

#### *(b) Fluency improvements*

Communication in face, body, sound and words is clearly promoted in these drama-based sessions. Increased confidence almost always showed itself in improvements in linguistic and movement fluency. For some however, the barrier to worded communication was higher, they remained quiet, contributing few unsolicited remarks throughout the two terms. For example Joseph:

*'...couldn't remember his story, though he says many relevant things under his breath but rarely speaks out or loudly enough to be heard unless the rest of the speakers keep quiet...even then he takes quite a time to say what he wants, seeming reluctant to take the limelight, but eventually says some definite things with a great deal of confidence [RN ???]*

Teachers stressed that SB was not the only positive influence on children's communication. Jeremy for example (a 7 year old Ghanaian)

*'...had never been to school ...no English, at first he had to just play in the corner with the toys whilst the other children had lessons – now makes sentences that make sense and speaks to other children and works along with the rest. He goes to a social skills session each week with the LSA. (RN (RB) 09.02.12)*

#### *(c) Vocabulary improvements*

Children learned and used new vocabulary most often related to the SB activities. Children were frequently observed being given sensitive support in understanding and using language by drama practitioners. New words frequently used by the SB children included specialist drama vocabulary: *character, imagine, pretend, performance, stage, acting, story square*. Additionally children used language in a different way, for example distancing themselves from a character when describing their role in a story, for example, 'Hannah child came up to see mum.' (AA Report 15.12.11)

#### *(d) Emotional engagement*

In one session each child took on the role of a child opening a special present with their mum (a male teacher) sitting at their side showing gentle interest. Three reported responses illustrate their depth of emotional engagement:

Harriet who is a quiet and smiley girl - opened the parcel and found a letter, which she pretended to read in-role, she decided that the letter was Sulaiman asking her over to play at his house, she then moved the drama on and brought Sulaiman into the story square to act out them playing. Sulaiman entered the drama with great joy

Abdi opening it up found a nintendo ds and carefully with great detail showed mum how to play with it

Jenny opened the parcel and found 9 butterflies, which she then gently played with in the story square and then lay down and went to sleep saying goodnight to each of the butterflies (AA SB Report 15.12.11)

#### *(e) Better turn taking/giving*

Positive peer interaction was promoted in the SB sessions observed and the training sessions. Some children referred because of difficulties in participation in class discussion, found it difficult to wait their turn or were prone to interrupt others were referred because they were aggressively dominant. One such person was Hartley, who revealed important changes in consideration of others in two sections of his video commentary:

[Hartley, definitely and with strong eye-contact] *'They cheered for him ...it was Enrico's story he was racing and I was racing him then he got faster and faster and he got faster and then everybody cheered for him, there was a cup...look at...cheering about the winner [Researcher: I'm sure they were cheering you too] no they weren't, it wasn't about me.'*

*When you tell the story they write it down – our words- we're telling the story – then they tell it to the teacher... they act it out [Hartley, agreeing with the word 'exactly' which I offered] – because its 'our story.'* (Hartley)

An LSA spoke about a child whose behaviour had changed within two SB sessions'

I really wish Adam [SB practitioner] was here to see how confident and articulate Joseph was, I was amazed. He was sent to me for behaviour issues, he throws his weight around and can be quite intimidating, yet he took his turns and listened carefully and behaved very well too.'

Not every child changes as quickly as Joseph. Some drama practitioners reported issues with behaviour but recognised themselves as novices in control techniques:

- sending a child out does not really work in such a small group, but behaviour has settled more this (2<sup>nd</sup>) term because we are more experienced (SB drama practitioner, 08.12.11)

### *(e) Empathy*

The acceptance of diversity on cultural and individual personality levels is an important premise of SB training. In the classroom and playground some children had shown difficulties in putting themselves in the place of others. The playful activities throughout a SB session stress collaboration in thought and action and the language which children develop from these repeated exercises, is rich in references to 'we', 'us', 'our', 'ours' like the following extract from Yolanda and Hartley's observations on their video appearances:

*We go in the bubble and you pretend that you're floating, you can't touch each other because the bubble might pop and you'll have to do another one, [Yolanda, smiling shyly but constantly]. 'They're stepping in the bubbles and walking around, I can see Mohammed my friend – they are floating around,' [Hartley, looking happy and relaxed] If they touch each other you'll go inside and they'll just pop, [Hartley, very matter of fact, conscious of details throughout].*

### *(f) Longer and more complex interactions.*

Some children rarely made attempts at speaking independently in class. One '*never left her close friend's side for the whole of a year before SB, she would speak only in very short sentences,*' (RN (RB) 09.02.12). After only a few sessions she was, happy to be parted from her friend. Watching the video she remembered the story she had acted a few weeks before:

[Hannah, speaking hesitantly at first but with growing confidence]. *There was a spider a big one and they eat people, he [pointing to Stirling] was the, the squishy bit in the spider's mouth [both laugh, and Stirling shows how he became the squishy bit inside of the spider's mouth eating and makes Hannah laugh more].*

Complexity also shows itself in the increasingly imaginative responses highlighted by LSAs and teachers:

A couple of weeks ago we had a line in a story "The car went so fast that the paint changed from black to orange" and we had to act that out. I threw the problem back to the group "I wonder how we can show that?" and one boy, whose mum had insisted had no imagination, responded "We all put our hands down, and at that part in the story we raise our hands with a whoosh sound". We tried it and it worked, the group broke into a spontaneous round of applause, great theatre making - innovative, imaginative and, in these austere times, cheap. (Annand blog.2012)

## **5.2 Impact on adults**

The continuity of school staff involved in SB is an important principle. The growing confidence of TAs and learning support staff was a clear theme in both training sessions and interviews. The SB programme was claimed to have made a particular difference to the staff development of support staff at the two schools visited.

### (a) LSAs

Apart from the drama practitioner, LSAs are usually the only adults to attend Speech Bubbles sessions. These members of staff are commonly the only ones available to supervise out-of-class sessions. As a group their responses to SB were consistently positive, many expressing a new-found job satisfaction, reporting growth in confidence and new understandings of children's, learning. One LSA observed, '*...they get the attention of several adults – they're thrilled at that, ...they love the acting.*' (RN (NT) 09.02.12) another volunteered, '*I would say there is not one child that is not making progress through Speech Bubbles*' (RN, 08.12.11)

In a training meeting 20 LSAs listed the following further benefits of SB:

- Children achieve in a less pressured environment
- They have better chances of social integration
- They have a safe place in which to grow confidence
- They are given a space in which to verbalise and act out feelings and emotions
- They can confront their anxieties in a safe context
- Aspects of their social psychological and physical well-being are all involved
- LSAs have a different and more responsible role
- LSAs feel more job satisfaction and see SB as professional and personal development (RN, 07.03.12).

The same group were insightful about the difficulties of running SB sessions, noting that drama practitioners had different standards and philosophies to those of most schools. They reminded that schools had other and complex priorities which drama practitioners did not always fully appreciate. Whilst some schools quickly and enthusiastically embraced SB ideas others were concerned that the SB philosophy was not easily transferred to whole class settings.

'Open' body language, ( relaxed appearance, shoulders back, expansive and enthusiastic arm movements, bright sparkling eyes, and smiling faces) was typical amongst the four LSAs I closely observed. Each remarked that they felt happy and enthusiastic about the sessions, one volunteering. '*its what I come to school for, I love it.*' (RN 09.11.11) another claiming , '*SB is the best thing that has happened to our school,*' ( RN 15.09.11)

### (b) Teachers

Teachers were aware of possible ideological conflicts, but those interviewed were keen to show that SB was part of a wider and coherent school strategy encouraging every child to achieve their potential and get the best out of school.

'...you have to bear in mind some of the other things that go on in the class so these things [measurable improvements in communication skills amongst SB children] could be happening anyway, but speech bubbles is very popular with the children who go and that says a lot, these children are now reading and writing happily.' (RN (RB) 09.02.12)

A teacher with a specialist drama coordination role discovered that acting alongside the children created what he called, 'a protective/supportive space in which each child found it safe to communicate deeply held feelings and enter fully into the story,' (AA Report 15.12.11).

### (c) Drama practitioners

Drama practitioners involved in SB see their different viewpoint as an asset:

'...we [the practitioners, rather than teachers] understand children in a slightly different way and we need to be allowed to look at them in a different way.' (Adam, 15.09.11 in a SB training session)

They are conscious of the values-element of their work. Repetition of the SB values (figure 1) and 'core values of, hope, love, cooperation and respect.' (RN 15.09.11) colour the experience for everyone. Such stated aims result in a tangible humility shown by both practitioners and participating LSAs as they listen to children's stories and responses. In training sessions Adam reminds that SB practitioners,

'resist closed meanings or direct interpretations and stay within the story metaphor...we are not threatening we create an environment that promotes: emotional awareness, empathy and theatre making (RN, AA, 08.12.12)

The attitude of the drama practitioners may be summarised in two stories told at a SB training day:

#### Alex's story:

a boy was surrounded by a culture supporting his mutism...'when we went around the group for sentences to build up a group story, the group said 'he doesn't speak, even before he could open his mouth' . When it was time for his story we built it up through a system of thumbs up for good, *thumbs down* for not good, (eg was there a boy? Was his name Ismail? etc) As the story developed he began to look more and more stressed so eventually I asked, 'do you want to go to the toilet?' He put his thumbs up, but wet himself before he could get out and had to be taken out and changed. The other boys responded by taking over the story for him and when he came back he looked happy, and participated, his expression and body language had changed. The group stopped saying he doesn't speak' all the time and he has made friends with the boys who completed his story.'

#### Adam's story

One child came in and said, 'I'm not coming to SB because its shit,' the teacher responded by saying well just come along and watch, now this child is one of the most enthusiastic members of the group. The pupil's behaviour changed first in accepting turn-taking and then fully participating

#### (d)Parents

12 parents turned up at our [SB] parents meeting where we couldn't usually get them in for love nor money for other things' (LSA speaking at training day 15.12.11)

14 parents out of a potential twenty turned up to the parents session (Specialist teacher Grange School (15.12.11)

Parents sometimes saw being referred to SB as something negative – that there is something 'wrong' with their child.

one parent of a bright but shy child though her child should not be in the group 'she's above all this' but by the end of term she could see the positive effects, the child actually said, 'I'm going to pretend to be shy this year because I want to be in SB again' (Drama practitioner 08.12.11)

## 6. DISCUSSION

SB claims to improve children's communication skills are supported. Visiting speech therapists, researchers and PDC representatives have highlighted the speed and transferability of these improvements (LB, 2009). Questions remain however: Are these improvements sustainable? Does the SB approach confer other advantages on participating children? This research suggests some sustained development and links them with Fredrickson's theory and the wider well-being debate:

*6.1. Well-being visibly improves with enjoyment:* Throughout the research adult participants affirmed that children enjoyed SB. Their judgements on the physical



manifestations of well-being corresponded closely with those of the well-tested L W-B scale in *Figure. 2*.

*Figure 2: Description of a child at Level 5 of The L-WB scale*

- comfortable, radiating vitality, relaxation and inner peace
- self-confident,
- dealing with negative experiences honestly and calmly
- taking pleasure in activities and experiences
- showing little emotional discomfort
- having good, open and receptive relationships with surroundings and people
- flexible, readily adapting to new situations
- getting over upsets quickly and easily (Laevers, 1994, adapted JB)

After two terms of SB, most participating children were close to these characteristics, if not there already. Whilst experienced teachers confirmed the short-term sustainability of these advances, they need longitudinal research.

*6.2. Children demonstrate empowerment:* SB aims to give disadvantaged children control over their stories. The lack of adult interference in the words and ideas of the children's stories was frequently brought up by children.

Stas has our names in his book and after we make all of it up, we actually act what we told the last day, whatever we say they write it down, (Child's commentary, February 2012)

Assistants' and researchers' observations provided plentiful evidence of children's empowerment during sessions. The observed indications of enjoyment, and examples of receptive relationships, flexibility and relaxation generated by SB – indicated both children's new-found autonomy and new sources of affirmation. Opportunities within the plays publicly to play *with* emotions was often specifically connected to subsequent positive and articulated social responses, like praise, '*that was really nice story Jose*' (Child A, 01.03.12), deference, '*I think its your turn now Timon,*' (Child B, 01.03.12) and appreciation, '*I really liked that,*' (Child C, 27.04.12)

The growth of imagination and enthusiasm recorded in field notes, perhaps counter-intuitively, was accompanied by increasingly calm and more focussed responses. Small groups, appreciative audiences and the attention of respected adults clearly had their positive impact, but children's emotional, social and physical commitment to play their stories appeared intrinsically driven. Practitioners saw this inner drive as evidence of empowerment:

For some it may be the first time they learn that they can control aspects of their environment or change the outcome of things.' (AA, 02.03.12).

When asked why children enjoyed SB so much, one assistant answered:

Well they would wouldn't they, we're all taking notice of their stories....their stories count don't they, where else would they be heard? (SP, 27.04.12).

Regardless of home culture remembrances of such experiences were accompanied by the body language of positivity amongst SB children.

*6.3. Art-making involves emotionally:* many artists in schools believe art-making to be transformative. Adam described SB practitioners' role as, 'Wondering with children how it might feel to be in their story world.' He encouraged adult participants to, '... resist closed meanings or direct interpretation of the children's images but stay within the story metaphor'. Adult participants were exhorted to co-construct, 'an environment that promotes emotional awareness, empathy and resonant theatre-making,' (AA, 02.03.12). The evidence collected suggests that these aims were achieved at some level through the emotional and physical involvement of all participants. Some children of course were only partly reached, one for example, needed the TA to act with her, was reluctant to volunteer answers and sometimes made little sense in her verbal responses – but when mentioned in another child's narrative, beamed with pleasure. The arts of theatre-making, storytelling or building soundscapes were taken so seriously by practitioners that most children were quickly swept up in related activities.

*6.4. Values are explicit:* TAs observed that children responded differently to the adult theatre-makers, instructions, accepting direction more generously, imagining more freely than in class. This needs explanation. SB practitioners were primarily artists, living by their art, and signed-up to an arts company aiming to *live* its values. This intentionality and focus was consistently identified by parents, TAs and teachers, and may underpin the commitment and other positive states observed in children. The SB philosophy has a clear moral character concerning sharing, caring and respect. Authentic opportunities to live-out such values are essential if schools are to offer positive experiences for all.

*6.5. Play is central:* Play, both free play and group play is an essential part of childhood. Children commonly described SB activities as '*games*'. Assistants saw their role as '*playing with the kids*,' though for some the playful element was initially their greatest embarrassment. Mutual enjoyment between adult and child was however obvious during observations - the last observation recorded:

- smiles and laughter dominated, forward-leaning bodies, relaxed faces, open body language, whole body leaning towards TA with excited looks, good eye-contact, rapid speech, twinkling eyes, fast, expressive hand movements and expansive gestures...(27.04.12).

*6.6 The role of the visiting drama practitioner is central:* in the view of the TAs interviewed, the drama practitioners offered inputs difficult for teachers or themselves to replicate. TAs contrasted the uncomplicated role of practitioners with the complex responsibilities of teachers. Teachers also remarked upon the 'luxury' of being able to concentrate only on the quality of children's engagement in communication and language in action rather than on paper. The subject-specific language, focus and technical skill of external practitioners, (perhaps particularly those familiar with the local communities around the schools) was seen by several respondents as particularly helpful to the vulnerable or disadvantaged children referred to SB. Whilst participating TAs were enthusiastic to take the SB formula beyond referred groups into the rest of their schools, the importance of inputs from external practitioners in building capacity amongst both children and staff was remarked upon by senior managers in both schools visited.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

The simple focus, clarity of values, and enjoyment of SB provoked positive change in both children and their TAs. This change is measured not only in measurable reading, writing, speaking and listening improvements, but in the visible indicators of well-being amongst participating children and adults. These successes confirm the experience of other artists working in schools (Roberts, 2006). This research suggests that giving children's stories time, respect and an audience bestows a sense of environmental and self-control.

Imaginative play structured and supported by artists can simultaneously generate self-confidence, self-expression and positive relationships. Genuine adult participation in play was seen to motivate and scaffold children's personal and moral growth. This study also highlights important areas for further study, including the roles of:

- adult enthusiasm in schools
- humility in adult-child relationships
- explicit and shared values
- children's pride
- audience
- adult-child trust, collaboration and enjoyment.

Fredrickson envisages a virtuous spiral generated by positive experiences like SB. This claim needs testing in other practical and child-based settings. Finally the framework of virtues involved in social well-being: joy, empathy, co-operation, fairness and kindness needs deeper analysis. Little could be more important to children or society.

## **8. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are closely linked to the observations, interviews and findings of this research:

*8.1 That values like good listening, kindness and turn taking continue to dominate the decisions and actions of adults and children involved in Speech Bubbles.*

*8.2 That enjoyment, emotional involvement, the empowerment of children, the equal involvement of adults and children in dramatic play and storytelling continue to characterise every Speech Bubbles session.*

*8.3 That warm-ups and wind-downs continue to be well-structured, sensitive and fun.*

*8.4 That the children's own stories in their own words are genuinely listened to and captured by the leading adults and that no other education or cultural agendas interfere with the integrity of the children's stories.*

*8.5 That London Bubble Theatre establishes 'ownership' of the Speech Bubbles approach and structures and takes every opportunity to communicate more widely, its value and effectiveness in developing speech, language and communication. This will involve making more workshops, training sessions, literature and videos available.*

*8.6 That Speech Bubbles trainers support schools, especially through the empowerment of Teacher Assistants/ Learning Mentors, in widening the impact of the Speech Bubbles approach to non-referred children across each participating school.*

*8.7 That London Bubble works on developing the argument that the most sustainable support and progress for referred children is made when theatre practitioners themselves are brought in to lead the Speech Bubbles process in schools.*

*8.8 That marked improvements in child and adult social and mental health are explicitly highlighted as outcomes of the Speech Bubbles programme alongside improvements in speech, language and communication.*

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