Improving children's social and emotional health by dramatising their stories

In this article, Jonathan Barnes summarises children's perceived outcomes of a Speech, Language and Communication Arts intervention experienced four years ago.

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Speech Bubbles (SB) is a drama-based programme designed to address barriers in Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) among 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 ten children with speech, language and communication difficulties tell and act out one story each week, sympathetically led by trained theatre practitioners and teaching assistants. 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 speech, language and

communication and behaviour improvements,⁵ but there has been no study of longer term impact until the pilot evaluation summarised below.

After gaining permission from parents and school, six 11-year-olds volunteered to share on video memories of their involvement with SB four 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 anonymised child:

.... 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. All SB sessions follow a common pattern:

1. Ten children with SLC difficulties arrive in a room with a teaching assistant.
2. In a circle they chant SB's binding values with actions: kindness/gentleness, turn-taking, good listening and good acting. They
- then:
3. 'throw' their names into an imaginary bucket in the centre of the circle, using funny, quiet or loud voices,

4. join in warm-up/imagination exercises to get into theatre-making mode,
5. are reminded of the features of a good story: characters, a place, a happening and a 'good ending',
6. practice scenes from the week's chosen story, deciding with voices and bodies how to make settings like jungles, cities, shops, castles, unicorns or, dragons.
7. Next they: make a masking-tape 'story square' stage on the floor,
8. listen and act out the story in the story square as theatre practitioner slowly reads it, line by line, (different children take lead roles in each section of the story).
9. One child stays behind to tell the theatre practitioner next week's story.
10. The story is written down verbatim – no corrections, additions or prompts.

All interviewees remembered SB enthusiastically. Discussions 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 consistently remarked on confidence built through the SB sessions:

80% of children made measurable speech, language and communication and behaviour improvements

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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 premature, 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 the SB team and imagination, activity, fun, friendship, shared values, story-making and story-sharing linked to the process. 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?

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All claimed improvements to listening skills, speaking and participation

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