

Speech Bubbles – an evaluation of the 2013-14 extended programme funded by the Shine Trust

Executive Summary

Shrinking budgets and increasing outside pressures on schools, leave many young children with little support when they have Speech Language and Communication (SLC) difficulties. *Speech Bubbles* offers what appears to be a highly effective and sustainable means of helping children suffering the resultant poor social, emotional and educational well-being.

This evaluation of the London Bubble Theatre Company's extended *Speech Bubbles* (SB) programme was carried out by Dr Jonathan Barnes of Canterbury Christ Church University's Sidney de Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health. The programme, consists of 28 weekly opportunities for groups of 10 six and seven year olds with speech, language and communication difficulties, to tell and act out their own stories under the guidance of theatre practitioners. The programme is currently running in 29 schools in disadvantaged areas of London and north west England. The SB method uses the emotional, bodily, creative and relational aspects of drama to create the conditions for positive behavioural and educational development. It reminds us that a focus on children's well-being in school generates increased social, behavioural and educational capital cheaply and effectively. Learning Support Assistants and teachers participate in all activities alongside the children. Each structured session begins with a statement of the group's unifying values and after a series of warm-ups a child's story from the previous week, written down verbatim is taken as the drama focus of the 45 minute session.

School teachers and Special Needs Coordinators remark that the programme has been very successful. The evaluation was undertaken to report on the detail of these apparent successes to the principle funders of the current programme, the Shine Trust (www.shinetrust.org.uk).

A wide variety of sources provided the necessary to account for the popularity and positive results of the programme. School records, the reports of theatre practitioners, parents, class teachers, speech therapists and a team of independent teachers were each consulted. Teachers suggested that over 80% of Speech Bubbles children showed improvements beyond expectations in their learning, speaking and listening and in over 50% the progress was clear or striking. 85% showed progress in their emotional and conduct behaviour. Teachers singled out:

- **Increased confidence,**
- **Greater participation,**
- **Better listening,**
- **Increased Enjoyment,**
- **Improved relationships,**

- **Motivation and ability to speak out,**
- **Improved speaking skills,**
- **Enhanced language skills,**

as the major benefits of involvement in the project for a very significant majority of children suffering SLC difficulties. For a large number of children, such psychological and social improvements motivate, greater application, resilience and achievement in other aspects of school life.

The evaluator encountered minimal difficulties in collecting evidence from busy and over-pressed schools who valued the inputs from SB highly. The dangers of over-claiming SB successes were offset by evidence from both interested and independent parties. This evidence led the researcher to make the following recommendations:

- trained Theatre Practitioners and not teachers should continue to lead SB interventions
- the aspects of the SB method that include clear and lived values, creativity, children's own stories, embodiment and drama to explore and understand emotions should be preserved at all costs in its methods
- future evaluations should include randomised control trials in several SB schools
- the SB method should be franchised and eventually rolled out in disadvantaged communities across the country
- schools, academies and education authorities should urgently tackle mental health and well-being inequalities among children. Research, including this evaluation, suggests that such inequalities can be cheaply and effectively addressed by dedicating significantly more resources to creativity, the arts and artists in schools.

Jonathan Barnes February 2015