

Speech Bubbles

An introduction to the programme and a summary of the action research report, *The Art of Building Creative Relationships - Developing drama workshops for small groups of referred children aged 5-7years*.

Introduction

We are working in partnership with the Southwark Pupil Development Centre (PDC) initiative to create a programme of drama workshops that support children in KS1 to develop their Speaking, Listening and Attention skills. The programme is a response to the increasing concern that as many as 50% of children from socio-economically disadvantaged populations have speech and language skills that are significantly lower than those of other children of the same age.¹

We are currently in the first year of this programme of work and are running sessions in 8 schools with over 160 children all of whom have been identified by their schools as having a speech, language and communication need.

In the first term of the programme we commissioned a programme of action research² that would seek to discover,

- The contribution of the programme to improving children's communication skills.
- The knowledge and skills that practitioners need to deliver the programme.

The full report identifies early successes of the programme as well as pointing to the need for further research and potential developments. This introduction and summary includes information drawn from the evaluation session attended by the partners at the end of the first term.

Background to the partners

London Bubble has a history of creating innovative theatre and drama projects for schools. Our work with young children is informed by the "Play what you say" work of Vivian Gussin Paley. From 2006 to 2009 we were a partner in the Speak Out project³. Speak Out placed drama practitioners with Speech and Language Therapists to deliver a practical intervention in primary schools. The evidence and learning from that project had a significant impact on the setting up and structuring of Speech Bubbles.

¹ www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RW053.pdf

² The research was funded by Knowledge Connect. www.knowledgeconnect.org.uk.

³ The Speak Out evaluation report is available from www.londonbubble.org.uk

The Southwark PDC initiative is described as being ‘...committed to enhancing the wellbeing of children, particularly in relation to their emotional and personal development.’⁴ The programme is supported by the Educational Psychology Service. School PDCs taking part in Speech Bubbles 2009/2010 are; Camelot, Crampton, Langbourne, Oliver Goldsmiths, St James the Great, Snowsfields, Tower Bridge and Townsend.

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The programme

The Speech Bubbles programme is focussed on improving 5-7 year old children’s Speaking, Listening and Attention skills. It also has a professional development focus, supporting the learning mentors who work within the PDCs to develop skills and experience in delivering small group drama activities. The sessions themselves are delivered by a team that consists of a drama practitioner, a member of PDC school staff and supervision provided by a member of the PDC adviser team and London Bubble.

Programme structure

- A training day, attended by all partners.
- A planning meeting for each PDC.
- 24 weekly sessions across the school year. Planned and evaluated by the learning mentor and drama practitioner.
- 2 open sessions for parents.
- Termly half day evaluation and forward planning meetings.

The practice :- Story Drama

The activities in the sessions are planned to promote communication in its broadest sense. We recognise that developing communication includes an awareness of; body language, proximity, gesture, facial expression, eye contact, sounds and words, leading to more complex language. The sessions are structured and creative and work towards providing the children with a safe and contained environment for development. The story drama approach places the child at the centre of the activity, and they become at different times, author, performer and audience.

‘...one of the biggest advantages for me was the fact that the children had equal ownership over the stories...you could tell it had a really positive impact on them...’⁵

⁴ Southwark NHS Primary Care Trust.

⁵ School inclusion manager

The action research

The research was designed as a ‘collaborative action research’ project. In order to measure impact, using a qualitative research framework, data was collected from four interrelated groups of participants; children aged 5-7 referred to Speech Bubbles, classroom teachers and inclusion managers responsible for referral, learning mentors and PDC advisers and drama practitioners. The data collected included; reflective writing, session observations, (naturalistic enquiry), qualitative interviews, surveys. The complete report can be downloaded from www.londonbubble.org.uk

Early successes

We are in the very early stages of delivering this programme and we are keen to identify our successes so that we can build on them and develop a model of best practice.

Successes reported from the first term practitioner’s evaluation;

- Four children who have been identified as selective mutes have spoken in Speech Bubbles sessions.
- Children are becoming increasingly confident in engaging in the activities.
- School staff are developing confidence in leading activity during the sessions.

‘..Thank you for giving me the chance to take part, I have grown in confidence and feel I could run a Speech Bubbles session now...’⁶

Successes identified in the action research;

- Children’s engagement in the session was promoted by the drama practitioners structured but creative approach to practice. This in turn promoted opportunities to use a full range of communication skills in the session and increasingly within school.
- The sessions enabled most of the children to develop confidence in using a range of communication skills (and this despite their particular communication difficulties).
- Children are developing a sense of ownership over the way the workshops evolve and how the stories develop.
- Children are beginning to share their learning and experiences in Speech Bubbles with their peers, school staff and families.
- The programme has an impact on children who; Lack confidence in communicating. Have difficulty organising thoughts and then communicating them. Have poor attention and listening. Have English as an additional language.

⁶ This was from a learning mentor who was inspected by Ofsted whilst delivering a Speech Bubbles session and was classified as Outstanding.

Developments

We are developing and refining the practice of Speech Bubbles and continue to evaluate and research the programme through the rest of its first year.

We are particularly focussing on;

- Adapting the initial training programme to include an input from the PDC partner on child development and the ethos of creating a nurturing environment.
- Refining the referral criteria based on the evidence of success for different children.
- Auditing and identifying the activities of the sessions against KS1 Speaking, Listening and Attention outcomes in order to refine the practice.
- Exploring possibilities of effectively transferring the knowledge of the sessions to the wider school community.

Conclusion

Speech Bubbles has had an extremely successful launch as a model of arts, education and health partnership working and in terms of its direct impact on the children who are taking part. The findings from the action research and the first term evaluation are being used to refine the programme and build on the early successes. With the support of our partners we are looking forward to offering this programme to a wider cohort of Southwark PDCs in the 2010/2011 academic year.