

The Impact of 'Newham Speech Bubbles' on Pupil's  
Communication and Staff Practice:  
Perceptions of Teaching Staff at an East London Primary School

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## **Abstract**

This research study took place in a primary school context in East London, and aimed to discover teaching staff perceptions on the impact of Newham Speech Bubbles, a story drama intervention intended to develop the communication skills of KS1 pupils from disadvantaged areas.

There are three areas of the referral criteria for Newham Speech Bubbles, which are expressive and receptive communication, and attending difficulties. Perceived improvements in these areas were investigated, as well as the impact of Newham Speech Bubbles on the staff's own professional practice.

A further element of this study focuses on the amount of opportunities for creative learning experiences available in today's current education system, which has a strong focus on academic subjects and far less emphasis on The Arts since the introduction of the new National Curriculum.

This small-scale study used qualitative methodology, in the form of semi-structured interviews, to collect the data from four participants, who all work with the children referred to Newham Speech Bubbles to differing degrees. The findings suggest that there has been a positive improvement to the communication skills and confidence of the pupils referred to Newham Speech Bubbles, and because of this staff are using some of the 'Speech Bubbles techniques' within their own practice.

The findings of this research show that teachers feel that they are not able to provide as many creative learning experiences as they would like to, due to the amount of time spent on academic subjects and keeping up with standards and assessments. It has also highlighted the teaching staff's view that in the fast-paced environment of school there is an increasing need for interventions to support children with developing their communication skills, and that Newham Speech Bubbles is helping to fill a gap in provision.

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## **Introduction**

The objective of this research was to discover teaching staff perceptions of Newham Speech Bubbles, a story drama intervention that is intended to support Key Stage One (KS1) pupils in developing their communication skills and confidence; the potential benefit being enhanced experiences of the project in the future for the pupils, staff, and UEL students involved.

The aim was to determine whether the staff that work with the pupils referred to this programme noticed any changes to the children in other contexts outside of the Speech Bubbles sessions, and whether Speech Bubbles had had an impact upon the staff's own professional practice.

Recent educational reforms, it has been suggested by some education professionals, are an attack on the Arts and in turn an attack on education itself (Trench, 2014). The researcher sought to explore this suggestion, and discover the thoughts of teaching staff regarding The Arts, and opportunities for creative learning experiences within the current primary education system.

Speech Bubbles is based on a social franchise model that has been operating in schools, situated in what could be considered disadvantaged areas of England, since 2009. Speech Bubbles is provided once a week, for twenty-four sessions over the academic year. The Newham franchise of this intervention is currently provided by level 6 undergraduates, trained to be Speech Bubbles facilitators through University of East London (UEL) Civic Engagement Projects, and is overseen by Dr Sheila Preston, Head of Performing Arts at UEL (UEL, 2015).

The referral criteria for children to attend Speech Bubbles sessions are within three areas of communication difficulty; attending, giving and holding attention; expressive communication, how one conveys information; and receptive communication, how one receives information (Ripley & Barrett, 2008). This research sought to garner the staffs' perceptions on whether any of these areas were more significantly improved than others.

As well as ascertaining the staffs' views on the efficacy of Speech Bubbles and its impact on their own professional practice, staff were also asked questions regarding the quantity and quality of creative learning opportunities they are able to provide. It would appear that schools' focus on academic subjects, progress assessments, and standards, is at the loss of Arts-based learning, and it may be that Speech Bubbles is filling a current gap in provision.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation will outline the reviewed literature, drawing upon different sources and perspectives on creative learning experiences and Drama before focusing on previous research in to Speech Bubbles. Chapter 2 will explore the rationale behind the method of data collection and analysis used and explains why other methods were not considered appropriate. The assessment of potential risks to the participants and the ethical considerations of undertaking this research study are discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 will discuss the findings of the research, using direct quotes from the interviews with the participants. Finally chapter 5 will present a conclusion and possible recommendations for future research.

## **Literature Review**

This chapter will outline the importance of identifying children with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN), and the benefits of early intervention. It will discuss previous research into the efficacy of Drama based therapies, including 'Speech Bubbles', that aim to enhance confidence and develop speech, language, and communication skills. The author will also draw upon information from education policies, government reports, and other literature that has influenced how Drama is used, and taught in schools. The conclusion being that although there is evidence to suggest that Drama and creative learning experiences are valuable to children's social development, and communication skills, and that these transitional skills can improve academic success in other areas, educational reforms and the new National Curriculum, have seen far less emphasis on The Arts and specifically Drama.

Speech Bubbles projects operate in poorer socio-economic environments, and where many of the children have English as an Additional Language (EAL). The Communication Trust suggest that up to 50% of children from 'disadvantaged' areas may have significantly less speech and language abilities than others of the same age (Speech Bubbles, 2015). According to Mroz (2012), having SLCN can have far-reaching outcomes on social, emotional, and academic wellbeing. Lee (2013), gives a more comprehensive description stating that SLCN can have associations with lack of confidence and self-esteem; poor emotional and mental health; lack of educational engagement and academic achievement; conduct disorders; social exclusion; and unemployment. These factors are consistent with the findings in the Bercow Report (2008), a review of the support given to those with SLCN, commissioned by the last Labour government.

One of The Bercow Report's key recommendations is early identification and intervention. This is seen as vital in supporting both the child with SLCN, and their family. It states that the child has more chance of being able to improve their communication skills, and tackle any related issues when identification and intervention happens early.

Although there has been an increase in the choice, quantity and quality of interventions to improve speech, language, and communication, there is a gap in the research to provide evidence on their impact. Interventions need to be developed and evaluated carefully, and the results then shared with practitioners and service developers. This is not to suggest that some interventions are not practical or effective, but that further research is required. To increase the comparability of studies', developing a key set of outcomes may be useful (DfE, 2012).

To address the 'Communication and Language' and 'Personal, Social, and Emotional Development', aspects of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum goals, some early years settings use 'Helicopter Stories'. This is a story drama strategy, influenced by the work of Vivian Gussin Paley (Makebelieve Arts, 2016). Paley emphasises the importance of story-telling and imaginative play in helping children to develop their social skills, communication, and academic attainment (Gussin Palley, 1990).

Learning through play is actively encouraged in the statutory guidance for teaching the EYFS curriculum (DfE, 2014), however once a child starts formal schooling there is a jump to considerably more academic and institutional demands and expectations; some children may not be developmentally prepared for this (Christie, 2016).

'Speech Bubbles' intervention addresses the needs of those with SLCN in Key Stage 1 (KS1), where there may not be as many opportunities for creative learning as EYFS. Speech Bubbles is also influenced by Paley's techniques, and intends to improve communication skills and confidence in students, potentially preventing some of the associated factors occurring (Speech Bubbles, 2015).



Speech Bubbles sessions, are structured with routine and familiarity in the activities that begin and end the sessions, but at the heart lies improvised theatre in the form of a story. This is an original piece of creative literature by a referred student, which is narrated by the Drama Practitioner, and acted out by the whole group (Speech Bubbles, 2015). Drama Therapist Crimmens (2006) suggests that creative therapies and story-making can enable students to develop their communication skills, and is especially suited to those with communication and cognitive difficulties. And further evidence suggests that social skills can be increased in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through the use of creative literature alongside Drama (Peter, 2009).

Maples (2007), a teacher working in the United States, conducted research, using improvisational drama techniques with her students. She states that a positive aspect of using Drama in the classroom is that it allows for inclusive practice, as all students can participate regardless of their abilities. A limitation to this study is that it is just one person's experiment, and view, but she lists the benefits to her students as; improvement in confidence; increased motivation to learn; development of group and individual creativity; and a sense of belonging. She posits that when used effectively drama techniques allow for meaningful learning to take place, while at the same time providing transitional skills that can improve achievements directly linked to standards.

Daniels and Down (2014) found that through working with imagination, and allowing students to express their emotions and ideas in a safe environment, Drama has the potential to enable pupils to develop their social and emotional skills. Additionally, it is suggested that theatre making can be a space where students develop alternate ways of feeling and thinking about the world around them, and the position that they hold within it. To this end, Drama could be considered a 'social intervention', which challenges the status quo, subverting the social position, and stigma attached to being a 'free school meal pupil' (Daniels & Downs, 2014, p.52). It could be surmised that this conceptual aspect helps to build confidence, empowerment, and a sense of autonomy in students from disadvantaged backgrounds, something that Speech Bubbles also sets out to do (Speech Bubbles, 2015).

The Teaching and Learning Toolkit, which is recommended for schools and teachers, provides significantly different information. It highlights the cost-effectiveness of various interventions, intended to increase the attainment of disadvantaged students (those on free school meals), and suggests ways of best spending the pupil premium, additional money given to school when a student is registered as receiving free school meals. The Toolkit lists Arts interventions, as being low cost but very low impact, and that there is weak yet consistent evidence of creative arts enhancing attainment. It also states however, that there is a gap in meta-analysis and systematic reviews of Drama, and that the effects of Arts-based interventions are difficult to generalise due to the specific nature of the different approaches that have been studied, and the various targeted age groups.

It also posits that effects on transferrable skills need further exploration. The potential gains in this toolkit are measured by calculating the amount of extra months progress that is made over a year, and the estimated implementation costs (Higgins et al, 2012). Shultz and Bonnawitz (as cited in Gobnik, 2011), suggest that some areas of learning cannot be quantifiably measured, specifically creativity and curiosity, and that although direct instruction may teach children how to do well in standardised tests it also negatively effects children's abilities to discover new information independently and be curious.

Bassock et al (2016) conducted an empirical study of data sets between 1998 and 2006, analysing responses of teachers, working in the United States (U.S) to questions on Arts skills and English Language and found that direct instruction and not enough creative learning opportunities can lead to; lack of cognitive ability and playfulness; loss of self worth; behavioural issues; and lack of social skills; and that these factors are particularly more evident in children from low income families.

Head teacher Tom Sherrington (2015) describes in his blog, how he perceives the loss of Arts based programs to have been encouraged through standard and assessment agendas in schools, partly brought about through the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). EBacc provides data required to rate the UK in international educational league tables such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and focuses on mathematics, science and reading. This is overseen by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), whose purpose it is to identify whether teenagers, globally, are equipped with the skills needed to succeed in a modern world, and is linked to the World Bank (OECD, 2016).

In November 2014 Nicky Morgan, State Secretary for education, implied that Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths (STEM) subjects should be the areas that students concentrated on to gain meaningful, worthwhile employment, stating that it “couldn’t be further than the truth” that arts based subjects can be useful for “all kinds of jobs” (Morgan, 2014). Since 2010 there has been a 14% drop in students opting to take Arts/Creative GCSE subjects with a 25% drop in Performing Arts and Dance (Blower, 2015). There also appears to be a clear gap in achievement for those with SLCN; Lee (2013) documents that 15% of those with SLCN gained 5 A-C GCSE’s compared to 57% of young people in the general population.

It could be argued that as well as the suggestion that STEM subjects support gaining useful employment, they are also being promoted in an attempt to move the UK higher up the PISA league, and in turn keep up the economical dependency on the World Bank, and its demands. Educationalist Sir Ken Robinson states that to keep up with the global market creativity is actually key, and argues that well-established global companies are actively seeking employers who are creative. He suggests a change in academic paradigm from a system that is based on old ways of educating, rooted in the Industrial Revolution, to a modern organic and person centred process, with Arts based learning playing a lead role (Robinson, 2009).

Bassock et al (2016) found that the amount of assessment and direct instruction has risen at the loss of time for Music, Art, and child-selected activities. Some teachers suggested that they spend as much time on teaching phonics, and reading acquisition, than they do on all the rest of curriculum activities combined. It was also discovered the number of respondents that considered students' achievement to be directly related to standards, set by Local or National Government, rose from 57% in 1998 to 76% in 2006.

The Henley Review of Cultural Education (2012) commissioned by the Department for Education, offers recommendations for Cultural Education; Drama, Visual Arts, Music, and Dance. It suggests that Drama should be a National Curriculum subject in its own right, and highlights how Drama can support students in exploring relationships, realities, and concepts that words and numbers cannot convey. Henley (2012) also suggests that skills learned via The Arts can support success in other academic areas. He states that analysis from a longitudinal study over ten years with 25,000 students in the U.S.A showed that students from low-income families, who studied Drama, felt greater self-esteem and showed increased reading ability compared to those who did not study Drama.

The Government ignored the recommendations of the Henley review regarding Drama, with no official explanation, and chose not to include Drama at all in the National Curriculum review (DfE, 2015). The DfE have suggested that Drama is merely a matter of pedagogy, and not suitable for a subject in its own right (NATD, 2013). Drama has since been removed from the KS1 and KS2 curriculum altogether. It was once within the National Literacy Curriculum as part of the 'Speaking and Listening' area of learning. This area has now been replaced with 'Spoken Language', which places far more focus on Oracy and public speaking. It is down to individual primary schools and teachers to decide if and in what capacity they will use Drama with their students (DfE, 2015).

Recommendations from Bassok et al (2016) state that meeting standards of Literacy and Mathematics, and creative learning experiences, to promote skills in other areas do not have to be mutually exclusive. An analysis of Literacy Age Expected Targets (AET) for 162 students on the Speech Bubbles program, found that 75% of students were below AET at stage of referral, and 67% were on, or above, AET at the end of the intervention (Annand, 2015).

Barnes' (2015) evaluation of Speech Bubbles, used qualitative and quantitative methodology, and incorporated a longitudinal study that tracked ten children from year 2 to year 6. To provide a more objective assessment, as those that work with the project may have a vested interest and be biased in their opinions, external sources were also employed. Two independent speech therapists, carried out a battery of standardised tests on the students' and although only small changes were reported in vocabulary, there were significant changes in communication, confidence, listening skills, attitude, participation, and turn taking. Teachers and Learning Support Assistants (LSA) that were not personally involved in the project or schools provided their perspective. The findings showed that 85% of the staff felt that some improvement had been made in learning, listening and speaking. Barnes (2015) also reports, that an unexpected result in the analysis of his findings was the positive impact of Speech Bubbles on the staff involved, who claimed to experience enhanced job satisfaction since the project began, and accredited new skill development to their involvement with the project.

To conclude, there is evidence to suggest the links between The Arts and improved communication, confidence, and social skills. Additionally, there is research to suggest that skills gained through Dramatic techniques can be transferrable to the classroom and later life. This is evident also in previous research carried out to assess Speech Bubbles. However, there is far less emphasis on Arts based learning within the English National Curriculum since the 2010 educational reforms. It could be argued that this is due to a standards and assessment agenda enshrined in the education system, and the intention to advance in national and international league tables.

## **Methodology**

This chapter will outline the methods that were used to conduct this study and the rationale for the design of the research, justifying why it was chosen over other approaches. It will then discuss data collection methods, validity and reliability, and the steps that were taken to assure it.

The researcher has direct involvement in the intervention that was studied, and one of the aims of the research was to discover staff perceptions on the impact of Speech Bubbles on staff practice, therefore an Action Research approach was used. Educational Action Research is a process, which enables teachers and professionals to alter their practice to address a particular issue, in this case confidence and communication difficulties. When committed professionals focus their combined energy, time and creativity on a specific issue it allows the opportunity for improvements to be made (Sagor, 2000). As this is the first year Speech Bubbles has run in this school, using an Action Research approach had the potential to improve future practice of the facilitator, school staff, and ultimately the learning experiences of the referred children.

To answer the research questions and meet the aims of the project, a small-scale, qualitative study was undertaken. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and the data collected was analysed from an interpretivist perspective. It was decided not to conduct research based on a positivist paradigm, or use quantitative methods as it was felt that this would not have the potential to yield the rich data required to answer the research questions (Cohen et al, 2007).

A researcher using qualitative methods however, has access to the first hand experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the participants (Punch, 2009). It was important to the research aims of this study, to seek the views and perceptions of staff that work with the children who have been referred to Speech Bubbles. Using qualitative research methods, allowed the researcher to examine deeper philosophical questions that could not be expressed through quantitative methods, questionnaires and statistics.

By using qualitative methodology it was possible to interpret the data within the timeframe of the study, and to contrast and compare to the literature review. Content and thematic analysis were used to discern and code general themes, patterns and trends, which were interpreted (Punch, 2013) from the transcripts of the conducted interviews with the intention of providing good synthesis of the findings (Thomas, 2013).

This was a small-scale study due to lack of resources, knowledge, and time constraints, and it had three variables. These variables were TA perspectives, EAL leader perspectives, and class teacher perspectives. The TA who was interviewed is the member of staff who supports the Speech Bubbles sessions each week. The EAL leader is overseeing the project but does not take part, although she has been a participant observer on one occasion. The class teachers had referred four students from each of their classes to the Speech Bubbles program but had not participated or observed any of the sessions. The rationale for interviewing staff with varying amounts of involvement with the project was to discover the similarities and differences of opinions that came across, perhaps due to the amount of contact the individuals had with Speech Bubbles, and also as a strategy for validity purposes in that it provided triangulation.

Triangulation, also termed multi-method research, is used to describe the process of using more than one variable within a research study to strengthen the findings. When the findings of more than one variable result in the same particular data it becomes more salient (Bell & Waters, 2014). Sometimes more interesting findings can be garnered when participants have opposing views on the same specific issue, establishing that each person has their own individual sense of reality, and that the way we see our place in the world is not based on a single reality but made up of different individual truths. From an interpretivist perspective, the epistemology and ontology defines reality as being something that cannot be entirely objective, but rather it is subjective and constructed (Thomas, 2013).

Single method research, such as a case study, or an individual oral history, can offer a powerful personal insight into a topic, and can be of great interest and value (Thomas, 2013). However for the purposes of this study it was not considered suitable, as the intention was to discover different perspectives from different participants. This supported the Action aspect of the research. It encouraged the staff to reflect upon their thoughts and experiences of Speech Bubbles, and the impact it has had on their own practice.

Four semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted, lasting for approximately 10-15 minutes each. Methods such as surveys, and Likert scale questionnaires were not used, as it is near to impossible to gather the same data from non face-to-face methods or from impersonal, and sometimes unreliable form-filling exercises (Curtis et al, 2013). The strongest, and most valid research is often undertaken using both qualitative and quantitative methods, using themes arising from the interviews alongside data from questionnaires or statistics (Thomas, 2013). Although this was an initial consideration, due to the deadline constraints of the study, this approach was abandoned.



Interview methods carried out in a semi-structured way allowed the flow of thoughts, spontaneity and inter-subjectivity between the interviewee and the interviewer (Cohen et al, 2007). Observations such as the body language or gestures of the interviewees can also be taken into consideration when using this data collection method. This can sometimes be as relevant as the verbal communication that is expressed (Papatheodorou et al, 2012).

It was important to try to keep the participants engaged in the interview process; by appearing interested, giving encouragement and offering feedback (Shaw et al, 2011). The questions and format of the interviews were tailored to each interviewee, depending on the amount of contact they had with Speech Bubbles, and the relationship the researcher had with each of the participants. For example, the interview with the TA, who has taken part in the sessions each week since November, was less formal than that of the class teachers, whom the researcher had only met once before.

Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility, and deep probing which enabled more comprehensive findings. Significant data can sometimes be overlooked if an interview structure is too stringent, but having some pre-determined ideas of the interview questions allowed data to be collected that was more relevant to answering the research questions. (Cohen et al, 2007).

The validity of the study was insured through several methods. Interview questions were open-ended, and not leading in any way, factors that could have deemed the research invalid (Shaw et al, 2011). A Dictaphone was used to record the interviews, which were then transcribed in full. The transcripts were signed by the participants to show that they agreed that a true representation of what they had said had been reflected in the document.

This study was conducted with the knowledge that personal bias and the desire to categorise and stereotype is an innately human quality. These qualities have the potential to influence how research data is analysed and collected. For validity purposes, it was vital to provide the findings of this research project from a balanced viewpoint (Curtis et al, 2013). The author of this study is a musician and current Speech bubbles practitioner, whose background is in music therapy, and providing drama and music sessions for children and adults with learning disabilities, including those with speech, language and communication difficulties. The researcher is also of the opinion that The Arts play an important role within education for all children regardless of ability. Therefore for the purposes of this research it was acknowledged that personal prejudice exists, the author attempted to be self-aware, and challenged own attitudes when it was required to do so, through the use of reflexivity. (Papatheodorou et al, 2012).

## **Ethical Considerations**

This chapter will discuss the ethical factors that the author had to be aware of while conducting this study, with reference to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines and other relevant literature. UEL's ethics committee granted ethical approval, after submission of a research proposal [appendix ii].

A fundamental consideration was weighing up the possible harm to the participants and the potential gains to those involved in the Newham Speech Bubbles project. It was critical to safeguard the welfare of those involved. There could have been a potential risk of the interviewees feeling vulnerable about their own practice, or becoming upset when discussing some of the difficulties that children with communication difficulties experience (Papatheodorou et al, 2012). Therefore, it was important that the participants knew that they could ask questions, postpone or stop the process at any time. The researcher also aimed to be non-judgmental in regards to professional practice.

Another essential ethical consideration was being respectful of the diversity of the interviewees. It was important not to have any prejudice towards a person due to their ethnic or cultural identity; their sexuality; their gender; or age (BERA, 2011).

It is also acknowledged that researchers can be considered to be in a position of power (Cohen et al, 2007), to lessen this effect the interviews were conducted around a table rather than with the researcher sitting behind a desk, and the interviewees were reassured that the interview was informal, and not a test with right or wrong answers (Shaw et al, 2011).

Informed consent was gained through an opt-in arrangement (Shaw et al, 2011). Before the data collection method (interview) occurred, the participants were asked to read all of the information regarding the project on an information form, they then actively gave their consent by signing a form. It was explained to the participants that this research was being conducted for the dissertation aspect of an undergraduate degree, and they were assured that interviews and data analysis would be undertaken in a confidential and professional manner. Employing an opt-out arrangement was not considered appropriate for this study. This would have assumed the consent of the participants, and obtained data in a less transparent, covert way. (Shaw et al, 2011).

To assure anonymity and confidentiality the names of the interviewees, and school that they work in, have been protected by use of pseudonyms at all times throughout the analysis and findings, and the research data has not discussed the identity of the participants with anybody outside of the project. Additionally, no inferential information has been included, that could lead to identification of the participants or school (Thomas, 2013). All of the data collected has been kept securely, on a hard drive with a password that is only known by the researcher, for the purposes of this study only. Digital data will be destroyed with the raw data, such as voice recordings of interviews, once this assignment is completed.

On completion of this study, further consent was gained from all of the participants to enable 'Speech Bubbles' to use the data collected from the interviews for future research, fundraising and marketing purposes.

## **Discussion of Findings**

Until qualitative data, collected from interviews for example, is analysed and interpreted it means very little (Bell, 2010). This chapter will present the findings of this qualitative study with reference to whether it supports or contradicts the reviewed literature on creative, Arts-based, learning and the story-drama intervention Newham Speech Bubbles, with the aim of answering the research questions.

The three areas that the researcher perceived as being the most significant are primarily the teaching staff perceptions of the impact of Newham Speech Bubbles on the attention, communication, wellbeing, and social skills, of the referred pupils. The second theme to emerge was the impact of Newham Speech Bubbles on the professional practice of those involved with the project, and the final area for discussion is the teaching staff perceptions of the opportunities for creative learning in the current education system, and how Speech Bubbles may be 'filling a gap'.

These findings will be discussed under three headings using excerpts, in the form of direct quotations, from the interview transcripts. This is intended to support answering the research questions, and to add robustness to the data analysis. This approach to presenting the data was considered more suitable than other methods such as using graphs, charts or tables, as the qualitative data that was gathered through the interview process was too varied, and did not have the standardisation of other collection methods, such as data from Likert scale questionnaires for example which are easier to present in graphic representations (Punch, 2013).

## Impact of Newham Speech Bubbles on Pupils' Communication Skills

The first area to emerge from the interview data was the staff perceptions of the positive impact of Speech Bubbles on the pupils who had been referred. It is vital to the success of the project that the children are generalising the skills that they demonstrate within the safe Speech bubbles environment, by employing them in other contexts.

Significantly, all of the participants reported that the improvements in communication and confidence displayed in Speech Bubbles sessions are also being displayed around the school. The TA states ***"I can see children outside the session, in school, in lunchtime, that have changed a lot"*** and the female year 1 teacher comments ***"Before those children were quiet, and now even in the playground you can see the difference"***. This supports the findings of Maples (2007), who reports on the improvements of her pupils' confidence and communication through using improvised Drama in class.

All of the interviewed staff members considered expression to be the most enhanced skill in relation to the referral criteria for the pupils; difficulties with expressive communication, receptive communication, and attending. When asked to what extent each of the referral categories had made an impact, the TA said ***"expression the most...I can see the improvements every week, they are happy to talk, to describe, to show their emotions"***. The male year 1 teacher also discusses pupils improvement in expressive communication ***"We are definitely seeing that he is talking a bit more... I think Speech Bubbles has contributed to that... I think he did open up"***.

The male teacher also made the point that there are other contributing factors to why a child's communication may improve. Innate development; staff and peer support in class; and support from additional interventions are just some of the many other influences that may also be impacting upon the referred children's communication development. When attempting to quantify the impact of Speech Bubbles it is important to mention this, as Higgins et al (2012), suggest the task of measuring and generalising Arts-based interventions is no mean feat.

As well as expression, improvements in attention were also highlighted; the EAL lead stated, ***“The two that have probably come out the most are expression and attention”***. The year 1 teacher echoed this perception ***“I’ve noticed differences...paying attention definitely and how you express yourself...asking them questions...now they’re able to answer”***.

The TA was the only participant who highlighted a positive impact on the receptive communication of the referred pupils, perhaps due to the close working relationship she has with the children. It could be suggested that the other participants did not perceive receptive communication to be as significantly improved as the other areas of the referral criteria as judging the understanding and general comprehension of a pupil may not be as noticeable, or as easy to measure, as the changes in expressive communication and attention. The TA however reported that, ***“They understand and receive the information better, and they work harder”***. This echoes Maples (2007), who suggests that pupils' motivation to learn increased after using improvised Drama techniques.

These positive findings on the benefits of Speech Bubbles support the rationale behind the approach of using story drama (Gussin Palley, 1990), and story making (Crimmens, 2006) as a tool for building communication skills and confidence. More specifically it supports the research of Barnes (2015), on the positive impact of Speech Bubbles in different London boroughs with a similar demographic.

Barnes (2015) focuses part of his study on the improvement in pupils' wellbeing with regards to the Speech Bubbles program. The participants of this research study also expressed a positive impact on the wellbeing and social skills of the referred children. The TA stated **"they are happier, and they have more friends and they socialize"** which also reflects the suggestion by Daniels and Downs (2014) that using Drama has the potential to develop the emotional and social skills in children with communication difficulties.



## Impact of Newham Speech Bubbles on Professional Practice

The second theme that has been investigated is the impact of Newham Speech Bubbles on the staff's own professional practice.

The teaching code of conduct and Continued Professional Development (CPD), are entrenched in the educational profession. Teachers and TA's are expected to adhere to a professional code of conduct that ensures high standards of practice. This involves ongoing training and the ability to be critically reflective (DfE, 2011).

Both the TA and the EAL leader who were interviewed, and have contributed to Speech Bubbles sessions, are integrating some of the techniques they have experienced in the Speech Bubble sessions into their own lessons and small group sessions. The EAL teacher stated ***"I've already started using them [Speech Bubble activities] in EAL and nursery...the play on voice, and some of the games that you do are very useful for... encouraging children...and the tempo really helps the children to understand that there are different ways of communicating, and it can break the barrier"***.

This positive view of the impact of intervening to support communication development in early years settings, is supportive of the recommendations of the Bercow report (2008), which emphasises the need for early intervention. The TA states ***"We can use lots of the techniques...especially the children in literacy, they have done acting out stories sometimes"***. Additionally the TA comments that she has even ***"use some of the Speech Bubbles things with my own children at home"***.

Similarly to Barnes (2015), and also discovered unintentionally, was evidence to suggest an increased sense of job satisfaction from the TA involved with the project who stated ***“I’m waiting even more than the children on Wednesday afternoons because I know I’m going to be here [in Speech Bubbles session]”***. The TA went on to say ***“It has changed my life, my mindset...I love Speech Bubbles”*** and ***“ every child should have the opportunity to be in a Speech Bubbles session if they need that...I would recommend that with my heart”***.

These comments made it clear to the researcher that those who were most involved with the project spoke most highly of it. This could be seen as a limitation, as the participants most immersed in Speech Bubbles may not provide such an objective view as others. However, it also suggests that the playful, optimistic and creative nature of Speech Bubbles sessions has a positive effect on all of those who participate, adults and children alike.

## Opportunities for Creative Learning Experiences

In support of the findings by Bassock et al (2016), all of the interviewed teachers expressed that they felt there were not enough opportunities for creative learning in the current education system, due to the amount of assessment and monitoring.

Reflecting on this dilemma the male Y1 teacher described how creative learning experiences in class had diminished in his twenty years of teaching, ***“When I first started teaching...there was a lot more creativity and that was because teachers had more flexibility”***. The EAL teacher, in the profession for fourteen years, adds to this view ***“I think teachers are under a lot more pressure, with marking and evidence, we have to show that the children have made progress...pressure is increasing in Reception also...they are not getting that nurturing environment...to know that they feel safe and secure...I think that we’re losing that”***. The female Y1 teacher, who has only been teaching for three years, states that ***“the focus is so much on SAT’s and academic...it’s more... about progress mainly”***.

These findings support the views of Blower (2015), who argues that a focus on more academic Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths (STEM) subjects has been at the expense of Arts-based learning and Robinson (2009), who suggests that the current education system is not working and that a change of educational paradigm is needed if we are to produce creative, self-fulfilled, pupils who can go on to be successful employable adults.

Interestingly the only participant not to see a challenge in being able to incorporate creative learning experiences into lessons was the TA, perhaps this is due to having less responsibility than teachers for meeting expectations of performance, and keeping up with assessments etc.

All of the interviewees agreed that creative learning experiences are a positive and successful tool for teaching pupils, and felt that in spite of the added pressures of assessment and progress reporting there were some opportunities to use Drama, and other Arts-based activities during KS1 subject areas.

The female YR1 teacher commented, ***“We try to [incorporate creative learning] there are cross curricula links and everything”*** which is in keeping with the suggestion by Bassock et al (2016), that creative learning experiences and teaching Mathematics and Literacy do not have to be mutually exclusive. This teacher also posited that creative experience are useful for communication development, ***“they enjoy doing those sorts of things [creative], so they don’t see it as work, they see it as fun and start talking more”***. The male Y1 teacher stated, ***“I’m not sure about the other year groups but ...we do a lot of role-playing in nearly every literacy lesson with stories”***, and the TA stated ***“Especially the children in literacy, they have done acting out stories sometimes”***.

However, the participants also voiced the opinion that schools need interventions, like Speech Bubbles, outside of the usual classroom curriculum to support those who are having communication and confidence difficulties, as the school classroom environment is so fast paced. The EAL teacher stated ***“Those communication difficulties children have, where they just don’t know how to be heard or they withdraw from communicating, I think this is where this [Speech Bubbles] fills the gap...there is that gap now...that need, where children just don’t know how to get their voice heard amongst so many other children within a classroom”***. The male KS1 teacher supports this view stating, ***“You need interventions like this”***.

The conclusion to these findings, in accordance with answering the principal research question and evaluating the impact of Newham Speech Bubbles, is that the teaching staff reported that there has been a positive impact on the referred pupils communication in all three areas of the referral criteria, and also an impact upon staff practice.

Additionally the findings suggest that education reforms and a focus on more academic subjects may indeed be at the loss of creativity and Arts-based learning in the classroom. However, Arts-based interventions such as Speech Bubbles are helping to fill the gap in provision. And by providing this early intervention for children that lack confidence in their communication skills some of the associated issues of having SLCN may be prevented.

## Conclusion

This chapter will provide conclusions, and discuss the limitations and potential value of this study. Possible strategies that could be used if it was possible to conduct this study again will be explored, and finally the author will offer suggestions of how this research project could provide scope for further areas of study.

The principal research question of this study set out to investigate teaching staff perceptions on the impact of Newham Speech Bubbles on pupils' communication and staff professional practice. This was achieved; the findings suggest that the staff have seen improvements in the pupils' communication, confidence, wellbeing, and social skills; and they also describe how being involved with Newham Speech Bubbles has positively influenced their own practice. The additional research question regarding staff perceptions on the amount of opportunities for Arts-based learning in class was also answered; the general consensus being that there is not enough time to provide the amount of creative learning experiences that teachers would like to due to other professional demands, academic standards, and assessments.

A limitation to this research is that it is a small-scale study with only four participants, more significant data may have emerged if more interviews were conducted. However, the potential value of this study is that it could contribute to existing research on Speech Bubbles, and Arts-based learning, which ultimately may provide enhanced experiences for the pupils, staff, and students involved in the project in the future.

The perceptions of the staff that work with the children referred to Newham Speech Bubbles may have provided valid and significant data regarding improvements in the pupils' ability to communicate with confidence. However it is also acknowledge that there may be many other contributing factors to the referred pupils' communication and confidence improving over the course of

an academic year, other than through participating in Speech Bubbles sessions, and it is difficult to ascertain whether the pupils would have had the same level of improvement if they had not been referred to the project.

When attempting to measure the impact of Newham Speech Bubbles, it may be more beneficial to use quantitative and qualitative methods together to strengthen the reliability of the findings, without the appointed time constraints this could have been a better option.

The author intends to use the findings of this study to provide scope for further comprehensive research to be conducted at Masters level. This will be through the use of qualitative and quantitative methodology over a longer period of time. It may also be beneficial, when attempting to evaluate the impact of Newham Speech Bubbles, to conduct a comparison study, which may garner more significant and quantifiable findings.

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