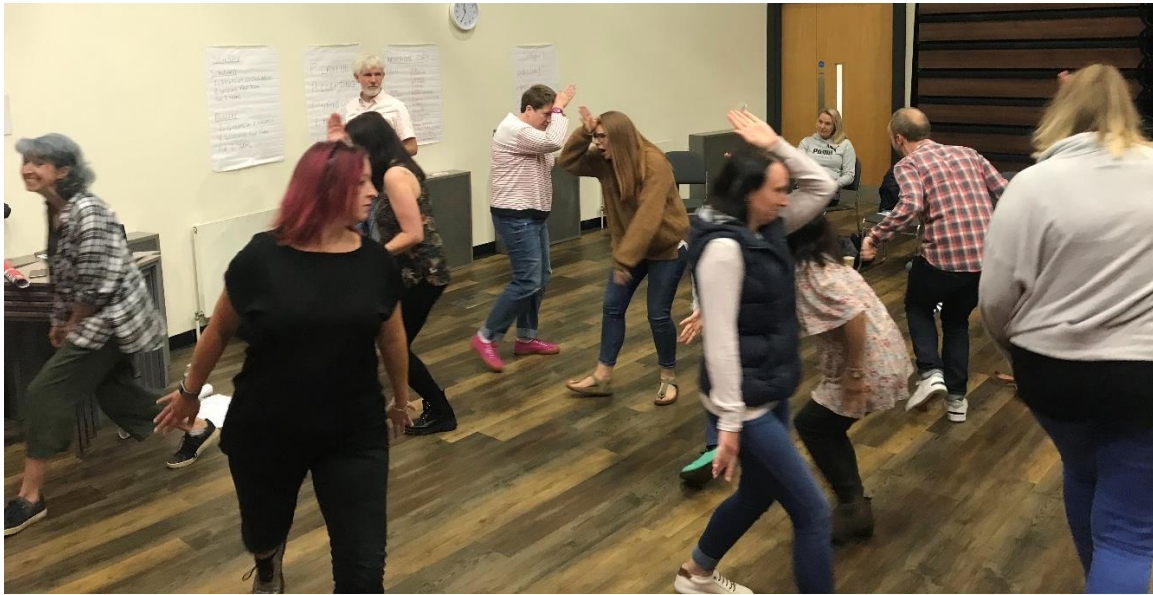**Speech Bubbles and the Teaching Assistant: investigating the impact of a drama intervention on school support staff.** August 2022

Dr Jonathan Barnes, Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Canterbury Christ Church University.

Preparing to play…

Introduction

Happiness matters and it matters hugely to learning. We know from educationalists, educational psychologists, and educational neuroscientists that positive emotions result in wider and better developed physical, mental, social, and intellectual repertoires (Fredrickson, 2011; Immordino-Yang, 2019; Biesta, 2015; Damasio 2003). In England today however, it is clear that many children do not have positive experiences of school. Significant numbers feel un-connected, unconfident, and unhappy. World Health Organisation figures (WHO, 2020) show that the proportion of young people (11 – 16) feeling 'safe at school' has steadily decreased, that 44% could not say they felt they 'belonged in school' and around 25% considered themselves pressured 'a lot' by school work. These figures on British, especially English, child well-being compare poorly with most other European countries. Teachers and Teaching Assistants (TAs) are well aware of the ways this unhappiness presents itself at school - mild disruption, isolation, distraction, poor relationships, lack of confidence or low interest. Often these symptoms first show in the earliest years. We also know from health research, that unhappiness in early life results in poorer general health as well as poor educational outcomes (Marmot, 2020). TAs have an important potential role in addressing these issues.

Children's general happiness has declined in the last ten years, (Children's Society, 2021). About 1 in 8 of 11–16-year-olds, say they feel unhappy with their lives (End Child Poverty, 2020) and there is plenty to be unhappy about. About 30% of England's children (0 -16) now live in poverty and poverty overlaps closely with other types of disadvantages, unequally affecting some black and ethnic minority communities, lone parent families and those with special educational needs (SEN). The Covid pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated many of these issues. Figures for children not in school rose dramatically during the 2020 and 2021 pandemic, and absence figures have remained high (Children's Commissioner, 2022) Numbers of children identified as needing SEN and Disabilities (SEND) support have risen, as have those on Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plans and statements of SEN (Gov UK, 2022). Taken together, children disadvantaged through absence, illness, mental ill-health, lack of support or guidance, speech, language, or communication difficulties (Communication Trust, 2017) poverty, discrimination, or social deprivation, represent concerning percentages of the school population.

The importance of speech, language, and communication (SLC) to the mental and social health of children was highlighted by the seminal Bercow Review of 2008. It showed that poor provision and low achievement in SLC result in lasting, negative impacts on children's confidence, learning and emotional development (Bercow, 2008). The review stressed the value of early SLC inputs underpinned by good research. TAs are often central to these inputs. The Speech Bubbles intervention and the research it commissioned, was partly a result of this focus.

Speech Bubbles

From 2009 Speech Bubbles (SB) originally called *Speak Out* (O'Neill, 2009), was developed by the London Bubble theatre company as a school-based, weekly drama programme to support those with SLC difficulties. It was run by specialist drama practitioners (DP) from the theatre company, during the school day. Initially, SB worked with a range of primary, special schools, and Pupil Referral Units in southeast London. From its inception the programme emphasised supporting children, (mostly 6- and 7-year-olds) to gain confidence and develop their physical and verbal communication skills. Children were referred to the

programme by their class teacher or SEND coordinator. In groups of up to ten, accompanied by a TA they joined a weekly, 45-minute, group drama session, *'to play, to tell stories and to have fun'* (Speech Bubbles website) usually over a 24-week period.

The impact of Speech Bubbles has been closely monitored by researchers and speech and language specialists ever since. Its growth and popularity have resulted from consistent evidence of improvements in children's participation, confidence, ability to speak out and social interactivity. Since becoming an independent charity in 2021 Speech Bubbles has implemented a well-received training package for TAs and a comprehensive development programme with partner theatre companies, and expanded its work throughout London and in Kent, east Sussex, Manchester, Oldham, and Rochdale (SB website). Teachers in every area report similar improvements in speech, language, and communication in around 80% of the children attending a period of SB sessions. Many also comment on its positive impact on the wider environment of school. This research funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation focusses on the effects of involvement in SB on the essential bridge between this externally provided programme and the school itself – the Teaching Assistant.

Teaching Assistants have become an essential part of primary school life over the last 30 years. They represent around one third of the overall school workforce, a higher percentage in primary school and nurseries. Despite training and qualification opportunities, most are relatively poorly paid, often untrained, and high percentages admit to reluctantly seeking better paid work (Unison, 2021). Within primary schools they are usually close to the local community and very frequently seen by children and their carers as a trusted, accessible adult that bridges community and the education system. TAs are often the first school contact for an anxious child or carer. Currently it is TAs who do most of the work with children with SEND – it might be argued that they, 'hold the system together'. They support classroom teachers in a wide variety of ways including making and preparing resources and equipment, supporting groups and individual children in their learning, playtime supervision and occasionally leading lessons or covering for absent teachers.

The TA is normally the adult who accompanies children to every SB session. These children with speech, language and communication difficulties will be well-known to the TA. In a session the TA is encouraged to enter fully into all activities on an equal level with the children. After a session they meet with the Speech Bubbles DP to discuss each child's progress and often transcribe a child's invented story to be acted out in the following week.

Every SB session follows a similar format:

- chanting of the values of the group (good listening, kindness, turn-taking, good acting)
- warm-up songs and activities
- opportunities to invent and practise individual scenes from a child's story
- invitation to sit around a masking-taped 'story square' marked out of the classroom floor
- rehearsal within the story square of settings, sounds and particular events necessary for the week's story
- visual reminders about the structure of effective stories
- acting out of the complete story in the story square by all children, TAs and other adults as the DP slowly reads the week's story
- gentle wind-down activities that include metaphorical 'washing off' of the characters children have played
- final feedback from each child to an observing teddy bear or other soft toy
- dictating next week's story by a child to a TA or the DP.

This simple and unchanging programme has now been used, assessed, and researched across over 400 schools. As a result of Speech Bubbles' consistent, often-reiterated values and their effective face-to-face training sessions, its transformative impact on the internal narratives of often unhappy children has remained high. Teachers, children (Barnes, 2020), DPs, Speech and Language therapists and school leaders have been consulted over these successes, but until now the role of the TA and its effects on them as key individuals in the school community, has not been researched.

This research

Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) generously funded a shortened version of the SB programme for a range of schools in highly diverse and disadvantaged localities in London and Manchester during 2021 and 2022. Ongoing Covid restrictions meant that in some instances the planned 16-week programme was further shortened to 10 weeks. Research into the impact of SB involvement on the TAs working in these schools was agreed as part of the feedback and legacy of the project.

Methods

As a result of continuing restrictions and difficulties presented by the Covid 19 pandemic through 2020 and 2021, the research was based on 3, 30 – 40-minute phone calls to each of 7 volunteer TAs from schools in London, Greater Manchester, and Kent. These conversations were recorded in notes taken during the dialogue, written up immediately after and transcripts sent the same day to the volunteers for verification, comment, additional information or subtractions.

The three phone calls covered the following areas:
1. *Settings and first impressions:* How long the volunteer had been a TA, why the role was chosen, what they initially expected from the job and if they had had any training. They were asked to describe their school and what they felt about their relationship with it. They were asked about their expectations of Speech Bubbles and any concerns they may have had.
2. *Celebration and detail:* After having experienced two or three sessions, volunteers were asked for examples of a good SB session, what they liked about the experience and about any changes they had observed in themselves. They were asked for examples of something they thought had gone particularly well and about how they felt during and after the sessions and about any observations regarding the children.
3. *Change and personal analysis:* Towards the end of the SB programme in their schools' volunteers were asked about any difficulties they had faced or observed, any surprises and any changes they would like to see, They were again asked for any observations about individual children both within SB

sessions and back in their full class. Volunteers were asked to describe any surprises or changes in their own feelings and approaches to their role.

The questionnaire posed a range of statements related to experience of the project for TAs to respond to. Questions covered impressions of participation, atmosphere, language, emotional response, communication, and changes in perception.

TAs were also asked to keep diary notes to record significant moments in their Speech Bubbles experience.

The researcher planned to analyse the TAs' amended records of conversation to generate themes, categories, and properties in the manner of a simplified 'Grounded Theory' approach. Further verifying phone calls and requests for diary highlights were also planned. The full text of the conversations was also entered into word analysis software to verify key words and sentiments.

Themes, categories of theme and properties of language used in responses were analysed for each participant. Commonalities verified, contradictions noted and addressed, and themes established.

Ethics and validity

British Education Research Association (BERA) ethics guidance was used to plan this small-scale research study. Volunteers were recruited at a number of SB training sessions, and they were informed that only their personal views were being asked for, that their names and schools would not be referred to and that comments would not be attributable to any individual responder. The researcher sought to establish a relaxed, friendly, supportive atmosphere over the phone, by emphasising the crucial role of TAs in supporting those with SEND. Official 'eduspeak', acronyms and reference to hierarchies within education were avoided and the need for personal emotional responses stressed. Participants were reminded that their answers were voluntary and retractable and that they would have ample opportunity to read over the records of their conversations. They were offered the opportunity to read the research article before it was published and that all evidence of the conversations

would be destroyed after use. Names and email addresses of participants and schools were kept on an encrypted data stick.

The validity of the findings was ensured by knowledge that all participants had experienced a common process regardless of the location of their school. They were asked the same questions in the same order and at similar junctures in the delivery of SB. The researcher strove to ensure a relaxed, informal relationship with each of the participants by prior meeting or introductory phone conversations. Key items of conversation, (illustrative stories and observations, direct answers to questions and additional information), were transcribed verbatim.

The research

The research sample was small – just 7 TAs Analysis of perceptions from these key members of staff in 7 schools can therefore only suggest themes for further investigation. Their responses however, displayed a great deal of consistency. Though diversity and disadvantage linked their schools, each one served very different communities in very different parts of England. Like all institutions every school had an individual past, unique location and an identifiable and singular ethos. The schools were not chosen by the researcher or by SB but were involved because one of their TAs was willing to volunteer their time for the research study. Though volunteers are likely to give more positive responses, their range of answers offered a credible indication of the impact SB on the work and lives of TAs across the country.

The difficulties presented by the Covid 19 pandemic continued through the year of research. Higher than usual staff absences in every school, meant that many TAs had to stand in for teachers and work with children they did not know and thus faced greater demands than normal on their time and energy. These extra pressures meant that not all the telephone interviews were conducted and not all questionnaires completed. In all however, 19/21 telephone interviews were conducted and 6/7 questionnaires completed and returned. Most TAs did not keep a diary. Respondents confirmed that conversations were relaxed and supportive.
As often as possible the words of TAs were taken down verbatim as it was felt important that their actual words represented their thoughts. These comments were double

checked with the TAs and subsequently quoted throughout the Findings section of this report. Analysis of conversations and questionnaire responses was based on the overarching question: *In what ways does TA participation in Speech Bubbles impact on their professional role and personal feelings?* Subsidiary questions, drilled down into responses more deeply and asked:

- *Did involvement in SB increase the skills the TA was able to bring to the school?*
- *If so what skills and in what ways?*
- *Were the relationships established by SB supportive?*
- *Did involvement in SB impact upon the personal attitudes of the TA?*
- *If so what attitudes and in what ways?*

Using a simplification of Grounded Research, themes, categories, and properties were identified by multiple re-readings of the transcribed conversations which were then marked on the texts with colour codes and numbers.

Findings

Readings of conversations held with TAs generated a number of common themes. These commonalities were often expressed in the same words. Aside from predictable vocabulary tied to the project (*children, school, practitioners, drama, story, square, speech, turns*) the volunteers consistently chose words like: positive, space (protected/special/ their own), voice, confidence, fun, different/difference, Covid, time. Much of the language used described aspects of personal or professional change. Seven major and often overlapping *themes* arose from detailed analysis of the conversations and questionnaire:

- Difference
- Fun
- Change
- Confidence
- Communication
- Child's voice
- Time and Covid

Inevitably conversations did not confine themselves to the TA's own lives and thoughts. Each wanted to talk about the effects of SB on 'their' children as well as changes in themselves. This unexpected data was accommodated by providing two categories for each theme – children and TAs themselves. Personal as well as professional changes in the lives of TAs were also claimed during the conversations. Each dominant theme could be subdivided into further *categories* and characterised by one or more *properties*:

THEME	CATEGORY	PROPERTIES
Difference	• Resulting from place • As a result of group size • In educational focus	• uniqueness • Small sized • Secure • Creative • Imaginative
Fun	• For children • For TA	• General nature • Specific to particular children
Change	• In children • In TA	• Improved behaviour • Improved participation • New ideas • New perception of role • New relationships
Confidence	• In children • In TA	• Improved • Shown in participation • Shown in contribution in class • Pride in participation in SB • Shown in relationships with children
Communication	• Children in drama sessions • Children in class/playground	• Improved range • More imaginative • More words • Turn taking/other social skills • 'Silly voices' • Stories • Positive praise

	• TA in drama sessions • TA in class and playground	
Child's voice	• Example of confidence • Example of change • Example of difference	• active • imaginative
Time and Covid	• TA reflections on Pressures and difficulties • Difficulty of transfer to teachers • Importance for children of Protected time and special place • Extra responsibilities	• Plate-spinning • Finances • Frustration • Importance of protecting

Difference

Many TAs began their responses with reference to the difference SB had made to them and 'their' children. One (TA 4.1) observed, *'…it's very different to being in a class, you have to be fully involved, taking part, in what the children are doing.* All showed acute awareness of the importance of predictability in the SB intervention. Its success in the eyes of TAs was founded upon having consistent timing, DPs, TAs, location, group make-up, session structure and values. Direct quotations from TAs (shown in italics) support claims relating to the differences brought by the SB programme. The verbatim comments also ensure that the voice of the TA features strongly in this report.

Most remarked on the importance of place. SB had to be the same room each week, not a normal setting for school lessons and a place where there were no, or few interruptions; in the words of TA 1, '*a time and space allocated just to the children*'. Many illustrated the importance of this special, different place:

In that small room the kids and I know that it doesn't matter if I say things in a funny voice or play around- no one cares.!! I see SB as a space for children, a place for them to have a voice, a space to be. (TA 7.2)

Some of these children are very very self-conscious – they have that rabbit in the headlights look when it's their turn to talk or respond but this space makes them feel more comfortable and positive…It offers a space for them to experiment with small roles – those that wouldn't be up in front of the class – a place for children to tell their stories. (TA 7.2)

The focus of SB sessions is different too. Primary teachers have a multi-focused role that includes; maintaining discipline, applying the school behaviour policy, maintaining good grammar, spelling, and speaking, addressing particular subject targets, responding to Ofsted judgements, assessing, differentiating, supporting and modelling usually in 12 separate subjects. The focus of SB is simpler. The intention to do good acting, good listening, good caring, and good turn-taking are chanted each week and DPs refer to these values weekly. Children's improvised stories are dictated and transcribed exactly, no notice is taken of their grammar and syntax. TAs quickly become aware of the differences between working with a teacher and working with a TP and their uncomplicated agenda. In the words of TA 7, *child-initiated activities are different from the 'normal and often restrictive classroom activities*. The routine of, '*repeated activities in each session'* (TA 2.2) and the *use of the language of emotion, of theatre or imagination* (TA 6.2) were highlighted. Others noted the variation in teaching style, '…*we do not often have others modelling different ways of interacting with children'.* (TA 5.3). '… *learning how to take turns and wait,* (TA 3.2), *about understanding not just speaking … reading and using facial and bodily expressions.*' (TA 1.1) *… confidence, speaking out, more engagement, better relationships* [all of which in the TA 1.1's view] *transfer to the whole-class setting'.* (TA 2.1).

A group size of just 10 children with 2 adults is also a significant difference emphasised by several respondents. For example, TA 1.3 remarked, '*the smaller group and 2 adults setting helps to highlight any other challenges such as understanding and behaviour'.*

Fun

Even before SB sessions started, TAs were clear that they were expecting fun as a result of their very well-reviewed training sessions. One summarised the attitudes she had gained from the training in the following words:

> *I won't be embarrassed, I don't take myself too seriously, it'll be a playful time.'* The *playful and silly things I'll share in will '…show the kids that we are all humans… I don't mind being silly…. if it's for the kids I can do anything.'* (TA 2.1).

After participation in SB many emphasised the enjoyable nature of sessions, *a joyful experience where they don't have to worry,* said TA 7.2, *we just laugh and laugh* added TA 5.2. That sense of pleasure was often liked with the freedom offered in a SB session. When TAs were asked to describe where the fun came from, their answers were often refreshingly direct and usually included their own joy alongside the children's:

- *The sessions were such a breath of fresh air, where children and adults could have fun and express themselves freely* (TA 5.3)
- *…. I was sceptical at first but now I feel more relaxed it's a bit of fun.'* (TA 2.2)
- *…it completely lifts the mood, and we just have real fun and its good for everyone's mental health, adults and children* (TA 5.2).

Describing the impact of SB on one initially reticent child TA 4.1 described them as, '…*just bursting out of his skin with pleasure,'* as their own story was acted out.

Change

The '*undoubted'* changes noted in children's speaking, listening, sharing and confidence throughout the 10 – 16 weeks of SB were ascribed to several related aspects. The small group size, special place, clearer focus, and fun, have already been credited, but TAs also identified that SB had:

1. *'… really helped children take turns, understanding instructions and making stories* (TA1.1)

2. *Generated a growth in imagination – it's all to do with encouraging play isn't it?* (TA6.2)
3. *Used positivity, all the time with the children* (TA 5.3)
4. *Helped TAs look out for the emotional aspects of learning* (TA 7.2)
5. *Made pupils feel listened to and noticed* (TA 3.2)
6. *Helped the 'little people' feel good about themselves so they can do their learning to the best of their ability* (TA 3.2)
7. *Encouraged teachers and TAs to be open and involved with the children* (TA 4.1)
8. *Helped children use their voice in expressive ways* (TA 2.1)

Changes in individual children were quickly noticed and enthusiastically expressed. Even after just two sessions TA5 was able to say:

> *…they've 'already become more expressive, speak as that character, with different facial expression and strong body language'… children who are normally very reserved have changed a lot, speak up, speak out - they are coming out and joining in 100%.* (TA 2.2)

> *One girl who was always shy and very quiet is now getting a 5 in every* [assessment] *category. In terms of confidence, she takes turns listens really well to others, thinks of new things all the time, contributes to others. She recently had a wonderful idea of a 'fish who was travelling to Pakistan and had a fish passport.'* (TA 5.2)

Between the first and second interviews all TAs had recognised the significance of the SB approach in provoking positive development in children. One reflected:

> *If SB had been available to me in my school I know it would have made a big difference, it would have helped me leaps and bounds. SB is a massive advantage and a benefit; it is a precious thing.'* (TA 1.1)

Most TAs reported that aspects of their own practice had changed. They spoke of the growth of their own confidence (evidenced in more detail below) but also of other

changes in their daily life in school. One described a change in her feelings about the role of TA:

> *It's changed my relationships with the children - lots of the SB children come to me for hugs now, they tell me 'It's my story this week', they are more positive with themselves and me.* (TA 3.2).

Others expressed pride in their involvement, for example:

> *I'm proud that I've had an impact, its added to my experience because I have joined in and not been a bystander.* (TA 6.2)

While others listed ways in which they had transferred ideas from SB back into their everyday classroom activities:

> *I have found lots of light bulb moments where I might ask the children to become a 'slow snake' to engage them in a story. Or use some of the games played in the sessions out into the playground.* (TA 1.3)

> *Now I can use my imagination more like the kids* (TA 7.2)

> *I feel more carefree and natural …. more like letting myself go…. It might make me more imaginative and sillier…. I'd like to think I will take something back to share with others in the class and the school.* (TA 4.1)

Some TAs, however, did not feel their practice back in class had changed much. In their view relationships with children *were already close*, though they admitted that perhaps they now *play more with the children in the playground* (TA 7.2). All however, noted the speed of change for the majority of children and their role in promoting that change:

I found that that when children were first asked to act, they refused and so in the next session when I said I'd do it with them it made a difference a real difference (TA 1.1)

I …just thought If I chicken out and foul this up, she won't improve …I made myself a shark by the way…. and she really liked it … after just 2 sessions I can already see a massive improvement in confidence and speaking out. 'I can't wait to see what happens as things go on. (TA 4.1)

Confidence

Confidence was the single most used word to describe SB's effect on children. It was used over 30 times in the first 14 conversations, often emphasised with words like, marked (TA6.2), amazing (TA 4.1) or huge (TA 4.2). This growth in self-efficacy was often illustrated with examples from sessions:

…one very, very quiet and shy boy who hardly spoke (and even then, only in a very tiny voice), by the end of the year he had his hand up regularly, spoke out in class and was much more confident with adults and generally (TA1.1)

I've already seen really, really big effects. they were a bit shy but really involved last week This week (week 2) they were more vocal…the very shy boy who did the story this week was just bursting out of his skin with pleasure - it was just amazing to see these children like this.' (TA4.1)

I enjoyed seeing them blossom and grow in confidence – it was such a pleasure. I enjoyed the fact that some children who don't meet the 'expected level' in English/Maths, could excel at something more practical, creative, and expressive. The sessions were such a breath of fresh air (TA5.3)

I have seen an increased level of understanding regarding challenges the children face. The sessions have also helped to build relationships with the children outside the classroom setting. (TA 1.3)

Interestingly comments about the TA's own confidence equalled the number of references to children's self-assurance. Four of the 7 volunteer TAs were open about their own lack of confidence both as a child and before their engagement with SB. They credited SB with important developments (*'flourishing'* as one TAs said), in their own ability to behave in less self-conscious ways. A range of examples from first, second and third interviews express this growth in confidence clearly:

SB has made only a little difference, to my personal confidence, though other members of staff would say that it has. I have enjoyed coming out of my shell. I saw that children responded better if I took the lead and let go of awkwardness and became a butterfly, a cat, or a princess. (TA 1.1)

…. dancing and playing about with the children, I can feel very intimidated by these sessions, but I hope I will learn to relax and not feel I'm making a fool of myself. But already I feel a bit more confident. When I was their age, I was a selective mute and so I know what it's like and I was watching one child (it was her first week this week because she was away the first week….and she was OK with other children but always super, super shy with adults whenever they came near, I knew exactly how she felt. (TA 4.1)

It's given me more confidence to express myself with children and with the teaching What pushes me to get out of my shell is that I know some children will really benefit if I show confidence and take the lead and show them. Lack of confidence has definitely held me back and I don't want that for them. (TA 1.2)

It's made me lose my inhibitions. It's given me more authority with the little people I take charge and get the children ready. I'm like a dog with a bone when its SB – my SB time with the children is paramount, nothing, no room changes no absences get in my way. (TA 3.2)

I am more appreciative of the time and space allocated to the children and I do feel more confident to immerse myself too, within the stories and activities in the session. (TA 1.3)

Communication

New-found confidence in TAs showed itself back in class as well as in SB sessions. Some used SB ideas in class reading group periods, others played warm-up games in the playground, all expressed interest in observing and recording specific skills nurtured by SB: speaking out, collaboration, creativity, empathy, imagination, story making and of course acting.

For children a range of communication skills form an important part of each session. The values-chanting, warm up songs and games, the story square work, the washing off and reflection activities at the end represent different kinds of communication. Refinements such as speaking out in loud, soft and silly voices, changing voices in the stories, using body language and facial expression were mentioned by some, but TAs also noted the general nature of improvements in 'their' children:

> *The children are all heading in the same direction – improvement in confidence, questioning, answering questions, speaking in role…' 'at first, they weren't able to but now they can speak in character, put themselves in other people's shoes. Back in class and playground they now work together collaboratively and imaginatively* (TA 5.2)

Several also noted the ways in which children transferred newly aquired communication skills from SB to the classroom, for example:

> *I've taken back some of the SB ideas to the classroom and use them with the children*
> *My acting skills have improved, and it has given me some ideas for building emotional relevance* (TA 6.3)

> *… those that are so, so quiet and those that are not so quiet are speaking out, having new ideas, some of which I feel I would never have thought of…*(TA 7.2)

Feeling part of SB was communicated well by the DPs. The sense of good communication between all adults in the room and the 10 SB children was considered excellent by each respondent.

Time and Covid pressures

The pressures of inadequate time for SB were raised by several TAs. Two noted the fact that without the PHF sponsorship they would not have been able to have SB in their school. One observed that running SB was no problem but that the only barrier was that there was *'no money in the budget at this time'* (TA 5.1).

Two TAs felt that 10 weeks of SB was too short for lasting effect. One remarked:

> *10 sessions is too short – the children are just beginning to come into bloom and it will be all over in two sessions they need more, much more of this* (TA 3.2).

Physical space was not raised as an issue in any of the conversations. One TA mentioned a beautiful and large dance studio that was used for sessions, and the importance of a very supportive head. Time and space for TAs to reflect on their learning and to *transfer the learning back to the classroom* (TA 6.2) especially their class teacher, was not always available. One expressed her fears clearly:

> *I get frustrated when I realise the teachers don't really know what's going on in SB because they have not done the training and they never have the time to drop in and see what's going on. The teachers think I'm just there for behaviour and to keep an eye on the children, but I tell them I am part of it.* (TA 3.2).

The evidence confirmed that most TAs however, had transferred some new skills back to their normal school activities. All of them had changed their attitudes. Throughout the conversations they showed awareness that the positive atmosphere and emphasis in SB contrasted with the usual experience of school for children with SLC needs. All agreed that positivity, inclusion, fun and creative expression improved 'their' children's prospects. The more confident TAs were able to communicate their new leaning to other members of staff. However, several expressed the view that they had no formal opportunities to pass on their new knowledge because of the multiple pressures on teachers.

It is important to record that SB was not equally good for every child. Some children;

> *…struggled to accept creative imagination and working within groups. This sometimes-caused distress to the child, and they have refused to participate or contribute in the session.* (TA1.3)

The time at the end of SB sessions for TAs to talk and assess with the DP about the progress of each child was precious. For a TA it offered a rare opportunity formatively to consider the progress of individual children in a less pressured, more creative, and play-like contexts. One commented for example:

> *I have taken the time to reflect a lot, often taking a mental note during the sessions. we do not usually have this time stop and reflect* (TA 5.3)

TAs were asked about the special difficulties presented by the Covid 19 pandemic. Many corroborated the observation of TA 5, that, *'there's rarely been a time when every child was there.'* Staff absence was also much higher than normal – sometimes as high as 5 teachers absent in a relatively small school. One TA offered an interestingly nuanced reflection on the impact of the pandemic by observing that some children had hugely benefitted from the extra time and prolonged conversations and activities with their carers during the lockdowns. Those with English as a second or third language, had entered school without the experience of English they would normally have had in the nurseries closed during 2020 and 2021. Many TAs noted that children had missed time to develop the normal age-appropriate skills of cooperation and turn taking but the SB had helped fill that gap.

Personally, and professionally several TAs commented that the Covid pandemic had made them reassess their life. Several said that SB had helped them recognise the emotional aspects of their job that they wanted to develop. In particular many stressed the importance of the positive atmospheres captured in phrases like: *'playfulness and fun, the emotional side of learning, being silly alongside the children* or adopting roles *for the sake of the children.*

Discussion

The data collected from just 7 Teacher Assistants during 19 conversations was rich and highly informative. Since TAs had volunteered to be questioned, they could be expected to be positive about the influence of SB, but the detail, originality and enthusiasm of their answers closely matched the responses of a much wider group teachers and TAs questioned in earlier research studies. Their expected tendency to provide affirmative and articulate answers was countered by the researcher's frequent requests for detailed illustrations of successes and a balancing focus on problems and difficulties.

The themes identified through analysis of the conversations and questionnaire clearly overlapped with each other, but further analysis narrowed them into wider educational themes like positivity, self-efficacy, creativity, and the social and emotional aspects of well-being.

Positivity

Recent research in psychology (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2018) with adults has shown the importance of positive emotion in all aspects of human development. Fredrickson (2011) has shown how conditions that nurture opportunities to observe, imagine, reflect, question, and enjoy mental or physical activity generate an upward spiral of positive emotional, physical, and social change in adult individuals. It is reasonable to suggest that generating positive emotions in children would also result in physiological, intellectual, creative, social and mental health gains. Psychologists, like Vygotsky, Bruner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Seligman have argued the powerful learning impacts of happiness, collaboration, friendship, and positive relationships. Educationalists including Rousseau, Korczak, Montessori and Robinson have also reminded us that lasting learning thrives in settings that support children's rights and inclusive values like: justice, kindness, hope, trust, compassion and friendship. Biesta, Booth and others suggest nurturing such 'soft skills' and establishing secure environments for children mark out the positive pedagogue.

Evidence from this research indicated that the training and actual sessions consistently provided affirmative experiences of acceptance, kindness, trust,

collaboration, empathy and fairness. TAs recognised these values as constructive influences in their own lives and those of children with SLC difficulties. The security and safety built within the sessions encouraged most children to participate and grow through sessions, though some with complex social and psychological needs or frequent absences changed more slowly and perhaps needed more time with SB. For most, (in conversation two TAs guessed around 75%) the positive climate and creative focus noticeably impacted on attitudes and activity back in whole class and playground settings.

The end-of-project questionnaire revealed that 70% of the TAs regarded their time in SB as *'wholly positive'*. All agreed they were engaged, appreciated, that communications were excellent. All said they felt part of an effective team. While not everyone agreed that their wider role in school had greatly changed as a result of SB, every TA spoke in some way of the weekly SB session being the *'best part of the week'*.

Self-Efficacy

Bandura, (1977[1], 1997) offered the term self-efficacy to describe an individual's belief in their own ability to achieve a goal. Self-Efficacy of course is situational. One can feel highly able to change things in one context but powerless in others. The confident belief in one's own ability to do something, get somewhere, change something/someone or face a challenge is probably fundamental to success and personal well-being throughout life. People with high degrees of self-efficacy are able to take failure and disappointment as part of the road toward achievement – an idea that has been developed in educational contexts by Dweck in her work on Mindset. An opposing concept of 'learned helplessness' (Seligman 1972) describes the sense that an individual has stopped trying to achieve a certain goal because of repeated negative feedback when attempting it. Feelings of self-efficacy or lack of it often develop in the early years as part of a child's socialisation, and include developments in their speech, language, and communication. Those with difficulties in SLC often experience the exclusion and sapping of confidence that, unaddressed, negatively affect relationships, learning, economic prospects, mental and physical health. When pessimistic explanatory styles develop, they are difficult to reverse, but the evidence

.

from TAs in this research suggests often substantial growth in children's confidence through their involvement in SB. The suggestion is that having one's story listened to, honoured, and realised by peers and adult supporters can be empowering and transformative and counter feelings of helplessness. We do not know whether or not this observed transformation is lasting, but evidence from another small scale study (Barnes, 2020) suggests that children reflecting on their involvement in SB five years earlier had developed narratives that credited SB with positive changes in their lives – as one child involved said:

> *... you should do good listening to [people] 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.*

Poor confidence developed in childhood can remain for a lifetime. Several TAs expressed a lack of self-efficacy in aspects like imagination, creativity, relaxing or the ability to be playful. However, confidence in such aspects grew quickly through practical engagement in SB and was reported by each of the 7 volunteer respondents. Fear of '*making a fool of myself*' (TA 4.1) was absent by the second or third sessions for all and 5 confirmed that they had transferred new skills and more playful attitudes back to their everyday job. Sometimes extended personal examples of new-found confidence suggested that sharing stories can be as important for adults as it is for children.

Remarks about TA confidence such as those shared in the 'Findings', were sometimes directly linked to more general, philosophical observations about the TA role. For example, in the first conversation TA 4 claimed they, *always thought that this job is the place where I am supposed to be and these are the children I am supposed to be with, and* followed this with a commitment in SB to be involved in, … *pretending and things like that if that delivers what is needed for the children.*   Indeed, the values that drew each of the TAs to their work were consistently child-centred. Progressively through the project, they recognised that silliness, fun, playfulness, imagination, and creativity were precious but often under-valued, aspects of childhood. Each TA gave some evidence that their confidence in entering into childish behaviour was essential to the liberation of confident childishness in children.

Creativity

Creativity can be defined as: 'Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value' (NACCCE 1999). This combination of imagination, outcomes, originality, and value are highly present in the SB method. From the first warm ups to the final reflections of a session children and their TAs are asked to use their imaginations, there is always an outcome in movement, expression or words, the outcomes are indisputably original and the children' peers, TAs and the TP clearly and articulately value them. The word creative was used frequently by TAs in the recorded conversations – not always positively – one remarked in their first interview *'I haven't got a creative bone in my body'*. The sense that SB was a wholly creative experience rapidly communicated itself to the TAs.

Creativity is humanizing. Awareness of personal creative strengths and involvement in shared creative activity can feel highly meaningful (Csikszentmihalyi 2002). The examples highlighted in the 'Findings' showed how creative involvement built individual and collective identity, developed self-acceptance, feelings of mastery, positive relations with others, a sense of autonomy, and purpose—factors commonly associated with well-being (Ryff 1989). The TAs demonstrated in their feedback that this sense of well-being applied to them as much as it did to 'their' children. Despite not being asked directly about creativity, many remarked that SB provoked creativity in all concerned, and was '*the best part of the week*', the activity they *most looked forward to* or that they felt *most important*.

Social and Emotional well-being

Socially and emotionally sustained values like collaboration, empathy, compassion, hope, respect and what Page (2018) has called professional love, characterised many of the enriching conversations held with these key workers in schools. Such inclusive and probably universally understood values, underlie the decisions of many teachers and TAs to enter education (Barnes, 2019). Yet we know that increasing numbers of teachers and TAs are leaving schools (Guardian, 2022). They leave because of excessive workload (NUT, 2018), unreasonable accountability measures, constantly shifting expectations, poor pay, lack of professional and public support, bad leadership, challenging pupil behaviour and lack of opportunity for creativity.

These negative conditions are blamed for a parallel decline in the mental health and well-being of teachers, TAs and children (Education Support Partnership, 2018; WHO, 2020). The social and emotional aspects of both being and learning are increasingly seen as fundamental to our health. This research has shown ways in which TAs can fulfil a vital role in building a climate where well-being can thrive.

Perhaps if more attention were paid to the well-being of teachers and TAs, they *and their pupils* would feel happier, more fulfilled and increase their capacity to give and learn (See also, Kell, 2018; Barnes, 2012). I and many others have suggested that a work environment that nurtures core and virtuous personal values, helps individuals discover and use their unique creative strengths, encourages friendship, and generates well-being. Aspects of that ideal world existed for a time during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 when TAs alongside teachers took on the task of providing on-site education, welfare, and emotional support for the children of other key workers and those with additional needs. Several of the small sample of TAs in this research spoke of their satisfaction in being so centrally involved in responding to this time of crisis. They spoke of fulfilling a core value of wanting to make the world a better place. For a period, there was no doubt that their uncomplicated dedication to children was doing just that.

The dominance of online learning during the pandemic highlighted many things that were missing from education. Chief among them were the social and emotional aspects of learning. During the lockdowns and quarantines, TAs with their strong links to local communities and their often emotionally significant role in children's lives were in a strong position to contribute in person to these vital aspects of schooling. Those who were part of the reintroduced face-to-face SB interventions after the lockdowns were able to extend this period where their unique bridging skills were used. The evidence summarised in the ''findings' above provide a glimpse of the various ways in which TAs' social and emotional strengths were used and enriched through the 10-16 transformative weeks of this shorter Speech Bubbles programme.

We know too that a positive social and emotional climate is critical to learning and other aspects of the development of young children. Educational neuroscience (Immordino-Yang et al, 2019) confirms what educationalists have claimed for ages:

that social and emotional intelligence is critical to achieving goals such as understanding self, others, cause and effect, how to solve problems and answer questions. Central to these goals is the ability involved:

> … in making friends and figuring out how to engage with others: how to empathize, share, play cooperatively, wait patiently, and take turns; as well as to solve conflicts or problems and manage anger or frustration. Each of these skills contributes developmentally to core aspects of SEL important for schooling, such as motivation, self-determination, self-regulation, and self-awareness. (2019, p.192)

Each critical developmental skill for young people was observed by TAs to be richly and often uniquely developed in the SB programme.

Conclusions

Many conclusions are possible from the evidence put forward in this report. As a teacher of five decades experience, I would offer the following questions and issues to follow-up:

1. *Staff development and legacy.* Many of the TAs involved in this research were untrained and often had little opportunity for staff development. Yet they are seen by teachers as highly valuable members of staff. All TAs saw their experience with SB as development for themselves and were able to transfer their new skills back to their everyday work in the classroom. Their immersion in the SB activities was considered central to the positive impact of the project.

   - **Should TAs be more highly valued and better paid for their contributions to education and social cohesion?**
   - **What would be the impacts if schools developed more immersive, practical, creative staff development sessions that always included TAs?**
   - **How can Speech Bubbles ensure that what TAs have learned through them is shared with schoolteachers and managers?**

2. *importance of non-teachers in schools.* Neither the TAs nor TP were teachers. They were not trained in education and did not have the multifarious responsibilities of the teacher. Their responsibility for the safety and security of each child was of course paramount and always evident, but beyond that their focus was a relatively simple list of actions – good acting, good listening, good turn taking and kindness. The fact that the atmosphere in SB was *'different, very different'* (TA 4.2) from the atmosphere in class was due to these simple foci and the high expectations of the adults involved. The question for further research is:

- **What additional value do TAs and non-teaching experts bring to schools?**
- **How can schools attract more non-teachers to enrich child and staff education?**

3. *Fun and playfulness, silliness and imagination.* These difficult-to-measure aspects exist in the best of teaching everywhere but are perhaps increasingly side-lined in attempts to meet particular measurable targets.

- **What is the role of playfulness and imagination in teaching and learning?**
- **How can it be better incorporated into the daily lives of primary school children?**

4. *Drama is an art.* Arts are clearly a low priority in many schools striving to improve 'the basics' of reading, writing, literacy, and numeracy. The arts are under threat from decreasing funding and this lowering priority. Research into Speech Bubbles over the last 12 years has shown that regular drama experience enhances confidence, numerous social and emotional aspects of learning, collaboration, originality, and creativity. This research has suggested that the non-teaching staff gained similarly.

- **Why are the arts disappearing from schools and education?**
- **What are the specific contributions the arts make to children's education?**

5. *Unconfident to confident.* TAs observed that many of the children involved in SB were unconfident, poorly developed socially, intellectually, linguistically, had difficulties in speaking out or asking questions and were not enjoying school. Their often-close contact with parents, carers and the local community meant that they often acted as bridges between school and home. Their feedback from parents and carers was that SB had made big differences in confidence and motivation to a high percentage of children.

- **In what ways is the 'long tail of underachievement' in English schools addressed by programmes such as Speech Bubbles?**

6. *Catching up after Covid.* TAs were undoubtedly seen as key workers during the pandemic. Their work with SB since then confirmed that children with SLC needs gained more from playfulness, fun and creativity than they had been through standard 'catch up' lessons in English.

- **What does the SB project tell us about the skills and knowledge needed to 'catch up 'after two years of Covid 19 disruption?**

Becky Bailey Photography for Kazzum Arts

References

Bandura, A (1977) Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioural Change, *Psychological Review*. 84 (2): 191–215.

Bandura, A.(1997). *Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: Freeman.

Barnes, J. (2015) *Speech Bubbles An evaluation of the 2013-14 extended programme funded by the Shine Trust*: Available at: http://www.artshealthresources.org.uk/docs/speech-bubbles-an-evaluation-of-the-2013-14-extended-programme-funded-by-the-shine-trust/

Barnes, J. (2019) Teachers' values: an International Study on What Sustains a Fulfilling Life in Education, *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, Vol.7 No 5,

Barnes, J (2020) improving children's social and emotional health by dramatizing their stories, *Perspectives in Public Health* September 2020. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1757913920927068

Barnes, J. (2012) *What Sustains a Life in Education?* Unpublished PhD, Canterbury Christ Church University.

Bercow, J. (2008) *The Bercow Report A Review of Services for Children and Young People (0–19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs.* Available at: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8405/7/7771-dcsf-bercow_Redacted.pdf

Biesta, G. (2015) 'What is Education For? On Good Education, Teacher Judgement and Educational Professionalism', *European Journal of Education,* Vol.50, No 1, 2015. DOI:10.1111/ejed.12109

Booth, T. (2011) Curricula for the Common School: what shall we tell our children? in *FORUM*, Vol 53, No 1

Children's Society, 2021, Available at: https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-08/GCR_2021_Full_Report.pdf

Children's Commissioner (2022) Available at:
 https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/voices-of-englands-missing-children/

Communication Trust (2017) Available at:
https://ican.org.uk/media/3215/tct_talkingaboutageneration_report_online_update.pdf

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002) *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness*, New York: Ebury Press.

Education Support Partnership (2018) *Teacher Well-being Index,* available at: https://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/teacher_wellbeing_index_2018.pdf.

Damasio, A. (2003) *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow & the Feeling Brain*, Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

Dweck, C. (2017) *Mindset: Changing The Way You think To Fulfil Your Potential*, London: Robinson

End child Poverty (2020) https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/key-facts/

Fredrickson, B (2011) *Positivity,* New York: One World

Fredrickson, B and Joiner, T. (2018) Available at:
 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1745691617692106

Gov.UK, (2022) Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england

Kell, E. (2018) *How to Survive in Teaching, London*: Bloomsbury.

Korczak, J. (2020) *Educating for Justice,* New York: Springer

Friere, P (1970) The Pedagogy of the Oppressed,

Guardian (2022) https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/apr/11/teachers-england-plan-to-quit-workloads-stress-trust

Glaser, B & Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* New York: Aldine.

Immordino-Yang, M., Darling-Hammond, L and Krone, C. (2019) Nurturing Nature: How Brain Development Is Inherently Social and Emotional, and What This Means for Education, *Educational Psychologist* 54(3), 185–204, 2019. Available at: *https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00461520.2019.1633924*

Marmot, Sir M. (2020) Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review Ten Years On. Available at: https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10106434/3/Bockenhauer_BMJ%20Ten%20years%20essay2pg3.pdf

NACCCE (National Advisory Council on Creative & Cultural Education) (1999) *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture & Education*, London: DfEE.

O'Neill, F. (2009) *Evaluation of Speak Out,* Available at: https://www.londonbubble.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/SO_Evaluation_5371.pdf

Price, H. and Ansong, E (2018) *An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the 'Speech Bubbles' Drama Intervention Programme, 2015-17*, available at: https://www.londonbubble.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/UEL20Speech20Bubbles20Final20Evaluation20Report.pdf

Pro Bono Economics (2018) A *value for Money assessment of Speech Bubbles*, available at: https://www.londonbubble.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/EY-000059113_Speech20Bubbles_Brochure_A4_for20web_6.pdf

Ryff, C. (1989) Happiness is Everything or Is It? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality Social Psychology* Vol. 57, no.6 pp.1089 – 1081.

Seligman M. (1972). "Learned helplessness". *Annual Review of Medicine*. **23** (1): 407–412.
doi:10.1146/annurev.me.23.020172.002203. PMID 4566487.

Speech Bubbles website (2022) Available at:
https://www.speechbubbles.org.uk/about-speech-bubbles

Unison (2021) Available at: https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2021/11/schools-risk-support-staff-exodus-over-pay-warns-unison/

World Health Organisation (WHO) (2019) *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being – a scoping review.* Available at:
http://www.euro.who.int/en/publications/abstracts/what-is-the-evidence-on-the-role-of-the-arts-in-improving-health-and-well-being-a-scoping-review-2019

World Health Organisation (WHO) 2020 S*potlight on Adolescent Health and Well Being,* Available at:
https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332104/9789289055017-eng.pdf