



Inner-city children with speech, language and communication difficulties showed significant improvements in response to a drama-based intervention, research from the University of East London (UEL) has found.

The intervention, Speech Bubbles, was developed by the London Bubble Theatre in the wake of an independent cross-governmental review undertaken in 2008 by John Bercow, MP, now the Speaker of the House of Commons.

The review underlined the severity of the impact of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) on children's confidence, social and emotional development, school progression and mental well-being. This year the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and I CAN published Bercow: Ten Years On ([www.bercow10yearson.com](http://www.bercow10yearson.com)). The follow-up report shows that as many as half of all young children from neighbourhoods with high social deprivation continue to have such difficulties. These put children at increased risk of a range of psychological and social problems.

Speech Bubbles uses a story drama approach to help Key Stage 1 children (age 5-7 years) to develop their communication skills. The programme was developed in partnership with Southwark Council in 2009, and is now available to primary schools in Southwark, Lewisham, Greenwich and Lambeth with London Bubble Theatre, and in Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Enfield, Rochdale, Oldham and Manchester with partner organisations. In total, more than 800 pupils are involved in the programme each year.

The research found the programme brought significant improvements when its participants were compared with a control group.

The researchers identified children aged between 5 and 8 with speech and language difficulties in three different inner London primary schools. The children were placed in two groups, the first of which received the programme in 2015-16, and the second in 2016-17 - a total of 164 children.

Children receiving the intervention in 2015-16 made significantly better progress than the 'control' group in three out of six of the categories tested - storytelling and narrative, understanding spoken language and social interaction. Children receiving the intervention in 2016-17 improved on their scores in spoken language, storytelling and social interaction without reaching statistical significance.

The study will be followed up with a Randomised Control Trial conducted by the Education Endowment Foundation. This is expected to involve 500 pupils across 25 schools, from September 2018, and will be one of five trials examining whether cultural learning approaches can help boost primary pupils' achievements. All five projects will be evaluated by UCL Institute of Education and the government's Behavioural Insights Team.

A separate report by Pro Bono Economics and EY, suggests that Speech Bubbles is a low-cost intervention that delivers good value for money.

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The project's patron is Mark Rylance, the first Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe theatre in London.

“What wonderful new evidence of the benefits for young people of the work of Speech Bubbles! I imagine I would never have become an actor if my parents hadn't been able to find people to help me with speech when I was a young boy,” he said. “Speech Bubbles is essential work for our children in schools.”

Jonathan Petherbridge, Creative Director of London Bubble adds, “Speech Bubbles is a drama programme developed by London Bubble - a company who run projects which bring the benefits of theatre-making to people of all ages. This report will significantly improve our evidence base, adding detailed knowledge about the programme's economic benefits to our evidence of the joy that children experience when they take part”.

Neil Pratt, Chief Economist Pro Bono Economics says, “Speech Bubbles delivers good value for money, with a benefit to cost ratio that is relatively high compared to values reported in studies of other primary age interventions in education. This is an encouraging finding, given the vital importance of good communication skills in a child's development.”

For further information please contact Adam Annand, Associate Director London Bubble Theatre, [adam@londonbubble.org.uk](mailto:adam@londonbubble.org.uk) 020 7237 4434.

The UEL research report is available at: <http://www.londonbubble.org.uk/page/reports-research-writing>

The report by Pro Bono Economics and EY is available at [www.speechbubbles.org.uk](http://www.speechbubbles.org.uk)

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