



Case Study

Tuneful Chatter at Marshland Primary

Rediscovering passion and purpose

Tuneful Chatter

Tuneful Chatter uses proven approaches to improving very young children's communication, language and social skills. Music, dance and drama specialists design programmes of early years provision enabling under-fives to take part with others in a safe environment.

Nikki Jowitt is a teacher and SENCO* lead at Marshland Primary School, in Moorends. She has always been passionate about teaching early years, so working with darts and bringing Tuneful Chatter into Marshland was something she was keen to do. After seeing an email about Tuneful Chatter from her headteacher, she knew her children would benefit. It was the 'perfect opportunity' for her pupils.

'I sometimes enjoy it more than the children!'

Tuneful Chatter has opened her eyes to new perspectives and new ways to engage with the children – that work.

'I can lose sight of why I came into teaching. That 'why' is exactly all that Tuneful Chatter is.'

Marshland has always been a small school, with just 160 pupils and 17-28. However, things are changing, and class sizes are increasing. The school sits in a deprived area of Doncaster, and changes are hitting the poorer families hard. The cost-of-living crisis has seen more barriers rise, and Nikki tells us that there is so much extra work needed to establish a level playing field for children. Due to new demand, there is now a new SEN Hive (Special Educational Needs) – lead by Nikki – for children with high special needs to be taught a bespoke curriculum.

Tuneful Chatter presented new ways to support the school with two paramount outcomes: Listening and speech development, and Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED)

Tuneful Chatter's research and evidence-based approach doesn't rush children or hurry school readiness. Instead, the programme focuses on nourishing and strengthening prime foundations. Nikki found her own values aligned seamlessly with darts'.

For children who went through essential early developmental stages in between pandemic lockdowns, speech progression has slowed. Children are experiencing reduced human interactions when growing up. Because of this, Nikki has noticed that some pupil's speech is 'delayed'. Work with Tuneful Chatter aimed to build her pupils up to have the confidence to interact and then work can begin on speech and utterance.

'The artists came in and impacted engagement and speech so quickly – two of the biggest problems we face here.'

The individual specialisms of Tuneful Chatter's artists have given Nikki insight on her own capabilities as an early year's educator. Their work with Nikki has instilled confidence in her own specialisms, reignited ideas, and meant that she has rediscovered magic from her past teaching experiences.

has noticed the positivity of Tuneful Chatter in herself and her school. There have been improvements in confidence, so in turn improved listening and empathy. Children are contributing to class discussions and helping each other more than she has seen before at Marshland. The glow of darts' intervention feeds into classrooms during regular schooling.

In her classrooms, Nikki can see the pupils' improved understanding of what it means to listen effectively – what it means to take turns and empathise with your classmates.

'Each week, I see the pupils more comfortable and more ready to engage with my lessons. This engagement means that they then listen more and can contribute to adult led class discussions. Turn taking is now strongly embedded.'

Beth Powdrill, one of the Tuneful Chatter artists from darts, has stood out for Nikki. Working with Beth has brought Nikki so much confidence. Beth took time to learn the expectations of Marshland's children and has instilled the two agreed outcomes in all her delivery.

'Beth's sessions are structured, adaptable and feed off our children's input. She is a spontaneous and instinctive artist.'

Always beginning with the 'Hello Song' on her ukelele with, Beth's sessions then take the children, and Nikki, on a real adventure. Each session follows a theme or focus which is then expanded upon and informs all stages of the session. The children warm up, get ready to go on an adventure, and the adventure is intrinsically focused on sounds and language. The outcomes are the focus, without the children realising how hard they're working.

'It is incredible how engaged the children are for the whole 40-45 minutes. Three-year-olds! This hasn't been seen before!'

Nikki beams when talking about Tuneful Chatter, feeling like she sometimes enjoys it more than the children! She finds the sessions so practical and so ready to work. Nikki can almost sit back and watch, observing the developmental patterns of her pupils and let their responses inform next steps.

'As an early years teacher and SENCO, you're so often bogged down by difficult admin, and intense routine of planning, observation, pressure, and inputting data. Tuneful Chatter has brought back that spark – the creativity and ideas that I once had.'

This is what made me want to teach, back when I was first studying and first discovered my passion. Tuneful Chatter brings me back to that vocation point.'

Tuneful Chatter has made a real difference at Marshland. Nikki says that this is because of a wonderful list of things: the artists, the multi-faceted activity structure, the sustained themes, the boundless props and resources, and the exploration for the children – and with the children.

'I don't want to do it injustice, and amazing can't be the right word. It's so much more!'

Nikki is now a celebrated advocate of Tuneful Chatter, and an important voice in early years education in Doncaster.

*Special Educational Needs Coordinator