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Story
Makers
Company



Impact Report Story Exchange Project

Empowering pupil voice through drama worldbuilding

by Dr Lisa Stephenson





Story Exchange:

Empowering pupil voice through drama

34

Participating Teachers & SLT

1,080

Participating children

5

Resident Artists

7

Schools

5,562

Indirect Beneficiaries
(across children, staff and legacy projects)

2

Years

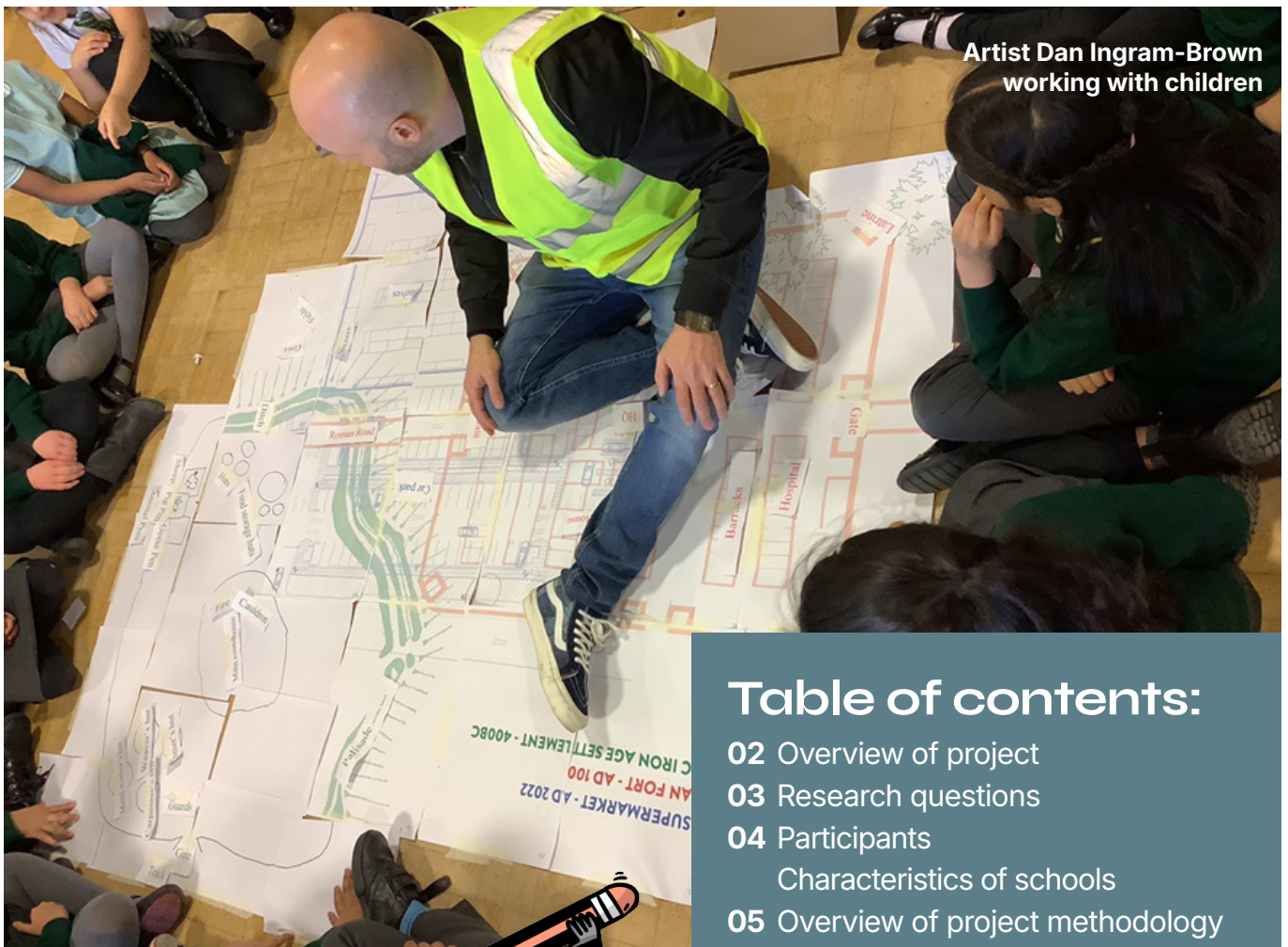
Project description

The Story Exchange project was a 2-year project (2021-2023) co-developed between Bowling Park Primary in Bradford and Story Makers Company, a practice-based research centre, at Leeds Beckett University. Working with artists, teachers and children, across eight inner city schools, the project focused on co-creating an imaginative and **culturally relevant curriculum** through drama and storytelling pedagogy with a focus on oracy, language and verbal and non-verbal communication development with children ages 7-10 years old across schools. Our project aimed to critically explore new visions of expressive language (oracy) education by centering the valued languages, cultural practices and knowledge of the dynamic communities in the school's localities. Five artists co-planned, co-taught and co-reflected with teachers across schools, using a coaching approach as they embedded a story making curriculum within the foundation subjects.



Research Questions

1. How does drama pedagogy activate learner's language, effective social and emotional communication, and cultural literacies?
2. How can drama pedagogy create a transdisciplinary curriculum (blending humanities, arts, social-emotional and cultural learning) which is localised? How does this impact learning?
3. How does a co-inquiry approach to professional learning support knowledge exchange, teacher self-efficacy and curriculum change?



Artist Dan Ingram-Brown working with children

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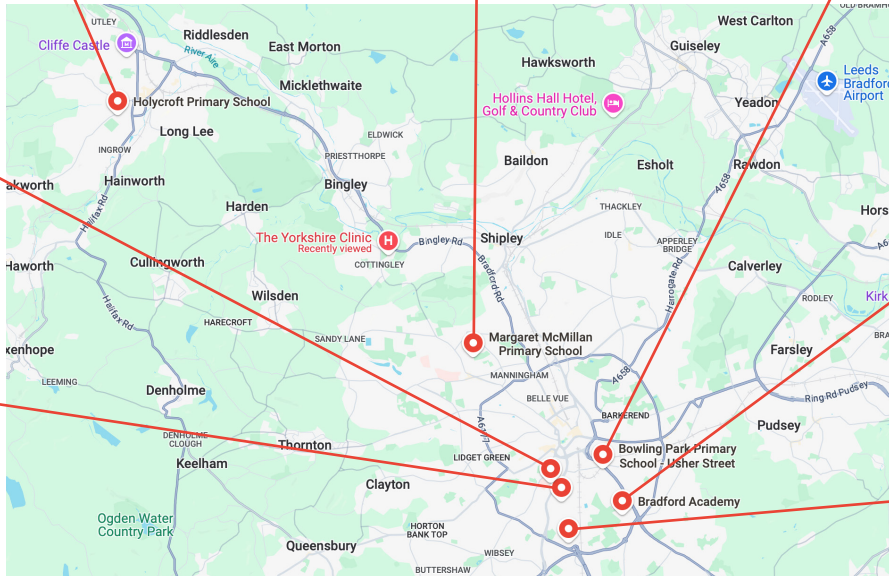
Illustrations Camille Audrey

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Teacher Development Fund, Paul Hamlyn
Foundation under Grant 36212



Participants:

7 large state Primary schools in Bradford



Characteristics of schools

35%
average children eligible
for school meals

1080
participating children in Year 3
and 4 (ages 7-9 years old)

The children come from a diverse range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds (e.g Lead project school: Most pupils are from a British Asian Pakistani background. White British and Gypsy Roma Traveler pupils make up the next two most significant groups. Nearly three-quarters of the pupils speak English as an additional language)

Project Team:

Dr Lisa Stephenson
Principal Investigator, project co-lead, Leeds Beckett University
Namrata Patel & Leigh Crowther
Bowling Park Primary School - Project co-leads
Ana Sanches de Arede - Project Coordinator
Professor Rachel Lofthouse - Co-Investigator

Artists:

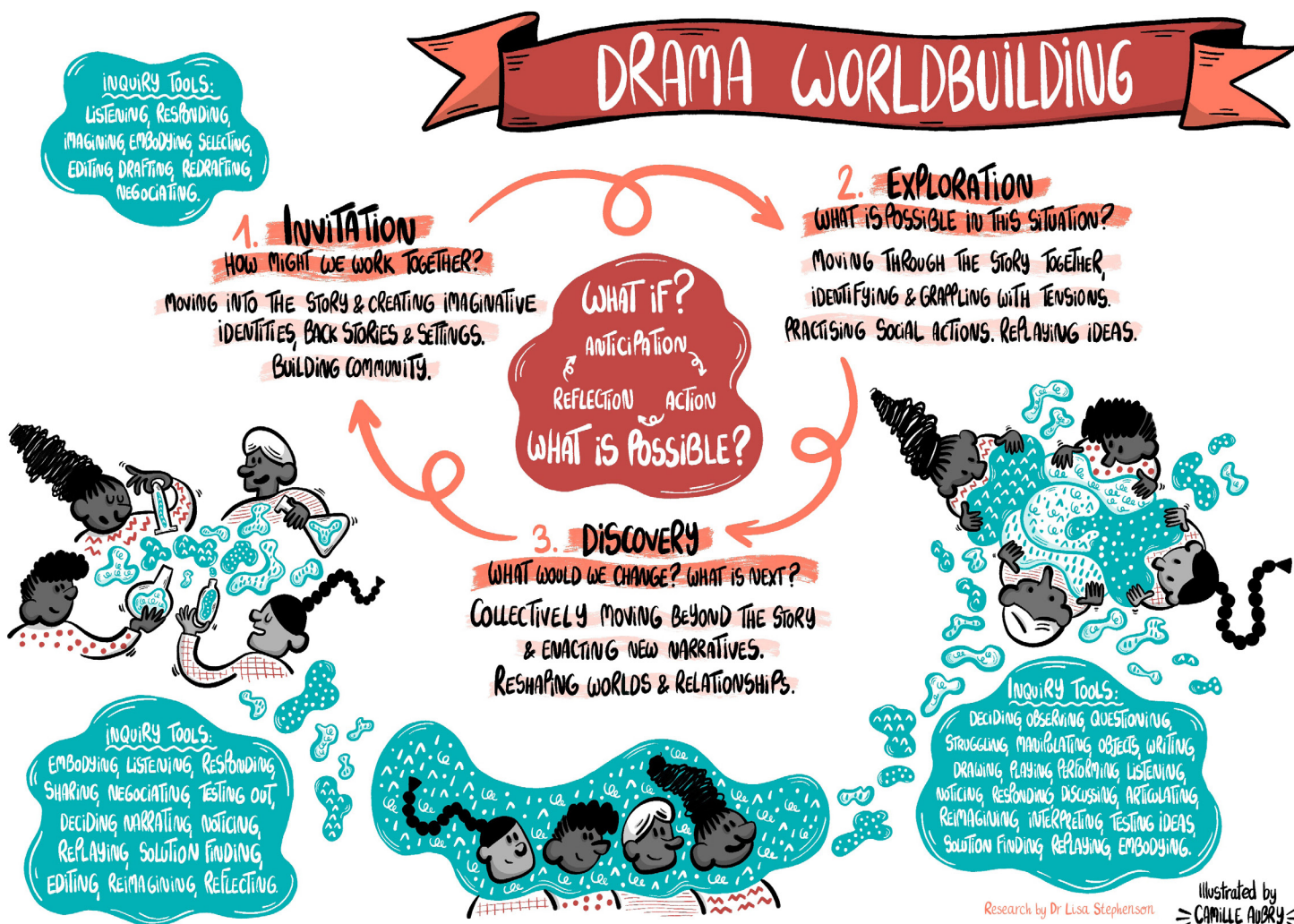
John Mee Alive & Kicking Theatre Company
Daniel Ingram-Brown, Michelle Scally Clarke
Chol Theatre, Siara Illing Ahmed
Juice Vamosi, Hywel Roberts
Jess Woodhead Chol Theatre

Overview of project methodology

The project ambition was to place an explicit focus on children's verbal and nonverbal communication, diverse literacies, and socio-emotional learning, creating an imaginative, culturally relevant curriculum for children in Years 3 and 4 across schools.

Teachers were paired with one of five artist educators (specialists in drama pedagogy) and given time and space to *co-plan*, *co-deliver* and *co-reflect* on 15 classroom sessions across each year (30 classroom sessions in total). Central to the **co-design** of our professional development and learning model was a coaching approach (Stephenson and Lofthouse, 2023) across the project. Professional immersion learning days brought all stakeholders together at the beginning and end of each term to share practice (12 days across 2 years). Systematic research evidence was gathered and shared across the project (pupil case studies, pupil journals, pupil focus groups, teacher/artist/SLT interviews, questionnaires).

The project used drama pedagogy, and not 'teaching drama'. Drama pedagogy activates emotion in action. Children can explore complex human concepts within humanities subjects more easily. Through drama pedagogy or 'drama worldbuilding' (Stephenson, 2022) children co-create stories with elements of active social problem-solving alongside teachers and artists, applying curriculum content such as Volcanoes. Within these fictional contexts, they are challenged to work collectively, coming up with ideas that draw from their diverse perspectives. Storytelling offers an opportunity to draw learning from children's cultural literacy practices more than writing and text. The project specifically aimed to draw from children's linguistic and cultural communication through this approach to teaching and learning.



Drama Worldbuilding pedagogy with Inquiry Tools

Impact 1

How does a co-design approach to professional learning support knowledge exchange and curriculum change?

The following 5 stages reflect the **process of curriculum change** evidenced across the 2 years.

1. Establishing and sustaining a community of co-inquiry.

The research findings showed that the key to the project's success was 'having enough space and time' for embedding new practices through systematic critical reflection and responsive, high-quality, research-informed professional learning within a supportive community of practice. This included modeling pedagogy with artists and teachers through immersive professional development days. The funding sustained this time and space for teachers, artists, and researchers.

"These are brave spaces and completely new ways of working." Teacher testimony

2. Co-planning, co-teaching and co-reflecting - changing how the curriculum is seen and felt.

Co-planning was one of the challenges of the knowledge exchange across schools. Initial coaching conversations reflected this across all schools, where teachers noted that "*planning was hard and there's a lot to it*".

The development of co-planning between teacher and artist took many *hybrid forms* with varying support from senior leaders. Over time, teachers noted in coaching reflections that *planning had become more iterative*, noting that there was more confidence in the reciprocal relationship between creative sessions, curriculum knowledge and children's engagement.

"The children are giving us lots of ideas for planning from their engagement in the sessions" Teacher testimony

3. Applying new pedagogical tools across subject disciplines.

Over the first term, teachers focused on recognising, implementing, and sharing '**pedagogical tools**', a term which they gave to many drama strategies. As the project developed the coaching reflections indicated a shift in teacher confidence as they began to recognise drama strategies for dialogic oracy and apply them independently across other subjects. A bank of these strategies was collected and shared across schools.

"I've hosted some staff meetings which have been a highlight and it's been really exciting to get the feedback from the members of staff who have tried the pedagogical tools that have passed on to them" Senior Leader testimony.

5. Seeing Learning and Curriculum Differently

Teachers noticed pupil investment in new ways which surprised them and exceeded their expectations of children's attainment across the project. This was evidenced systematically through coaching conversations, professional development days, and case study observational notes. This impacted their investment and confidence in implementing pedagogical approach.

4. Shifting creative mindsets.

As teachers and artists become more confident their identities as creative practitioners changed. Artists were seen to become *artist-teachers* and teachers were seen to become *teacher-artists* as they co-delivered curriculum with increased confidence. This was evidenced across all schools in focus groups and coaching conversations during the later stages of the project. Support from senior leaders was a crucial factor in positive implementation, where this was lacking, teachers felt less agency in implementing new approaches.

Impact 1



Figure 1 - Professional learning for curriculum change

Impact 2

How does drama pedagogy activate learner's language, effective social and emotional communication, and cultural literacies?

100%
of teachers felt that the project had impacted on pupil oracy

100%
of teachers felt that the project had impacted positively on pupil learning

The impact on children's learning was systematically evidenced through teacher observations across the project. We drew from our empirical research (pupil case studies, pupil journals, teachers' observation, pupil and teacher interviews) to evidence *how* children were engaging through the pedagogy, collectively adapting the 4 dimensions of oracy literacies (physical, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic) in response.

Our model showed that: The **social and emotional and physical (embodied) or felt aspects of Oracy were seen as the most sophisticated**, driving dialogic inquiry and increased language and communication acquisition. The **cognitive component was activated in new ways which foregrounded exploratory talk, creativity, and critical thinking**. **Linguistic choices** were activated through these components shaped by the children, teachers, artists, and their cultural practices.

Impact 2

1. Social and emotional learning component:

The core elements of the social and emotional strand of the Story Exchange project were evidenced through the following dispositions (skills, attitudes, and mind sets) placed centrally in the model: *Confidence of self* (positive self-esteem, independent thinking), *Competence of expression* (embracing risk, self-expression and honesty), *Collective ethical action* (confidence in negotiation action, compassion, conflict resolution) and *Critical Reflection*. These were segmented into four parts which represented a progression of observed learning across all school: **Participation, Active Listening, Balanced Decision making, Conflict resolution.**

Overtime, children expressed more openness and confidence in expressing and sharing emotions within the sessions and made the associations between sharing emotions and feeling better—suggesting a sense of emotional regulation and increased emotional literacy which was different to other teaching. Children also showed a greater understanding, empathy, and confidence in relationships with friends and greater competence at listening and responding to each other.

“I used to be a little scared because if I made one mistake, everybody would laugh at me but now I know that it doesn’t matter what you do, it just matters to let out your imagination.” Child testimony

Teacher and artists noted that children also spoke up for diversity and challenged viewpoints ethically in sessions as they became more confident. This engagement centred around asking deeper questions.

“Drama helps us learn about democracy because everyone has to share what they think to know what is best” Child testimony.

All stakeholders also commented on the impact of the approach on increased opportunities for culturally relevant learning and greater intercultural understanding evidenced through increased active listening, active compassion and conflict resolution which was practiced through the story worlds.

“It’s important to share stories, and then they can know your lifestyle, your culture” Child testimony.

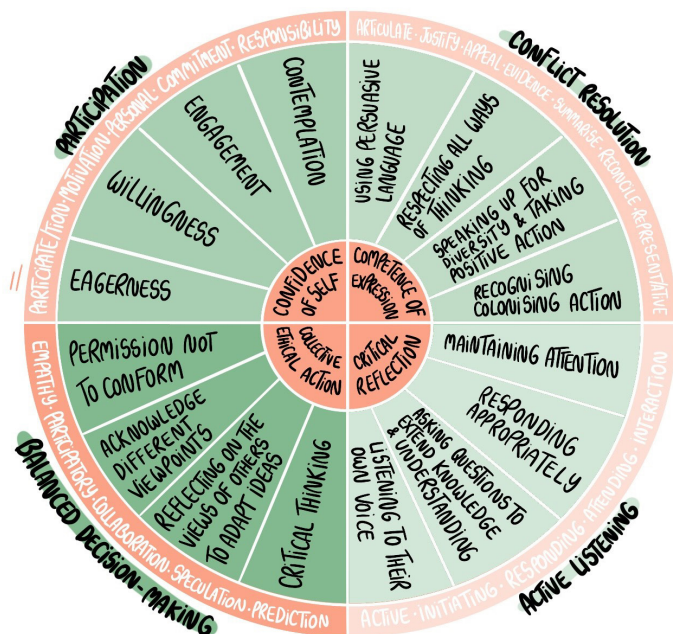
This was noticed by parents and other teachers in other applied contexts beyond the classroom. Teachers noticed pupil investment in new ways including increased confidence in self-expression, active engagement in sessions and stronger friendships.

“It was as if he needed the authority to be able to speak, because usually it was overshadowed by other children who were constantly talking and wanting to talk and wanting to act out” Teacher U.

“The activity actually gave him a bigger voice to be able to share his knowledge.” Teacher testimony.

During the second-year teachers and pupils were able to notice significant impact of the pedagogy on pupil’s ability to resolve conflict through balanced decision making.

“I think the way that they actually pictured the conflict itself and talked about it was something I hadn’t anticipated. They weren’t just coming at it from their point of view, they were asking for other people’s opinions and things.” Teacher testimony



SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL COMPONENTS

Impact 2

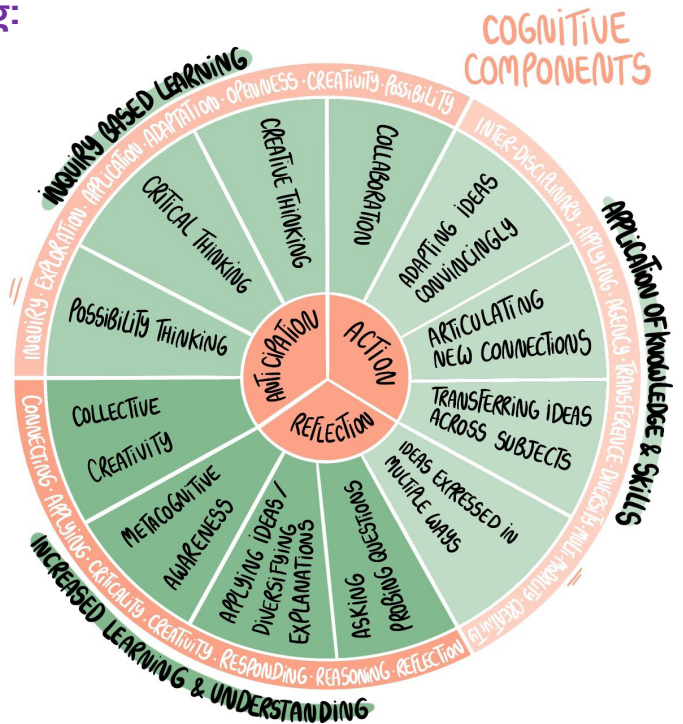
2. Cognitive components of learning:

Within our Story Project Core elements of the cognitive strand were evidenced through the following dispositions: **creativity, critical thinking, divergent and possibility thinking across the project.** This was reflected in teacher's and children's critical reflections. "Everybody can be creative - they won't be shy in front of all the people" Child N. The imagination is linked with **active, autonomous learning** by children. (Stephenson, 2024)

Learning and language were experienced and applied freely in a **transdisciplinary** way within the story worlds.

"I really like him because he (the artist) makes us go from the present like plastic pollution- we talk about that happening now. And then he talks about the past. He basically teaches us history and then he connects to the things that we're learning now and then make a whole story about it."

Child testimony



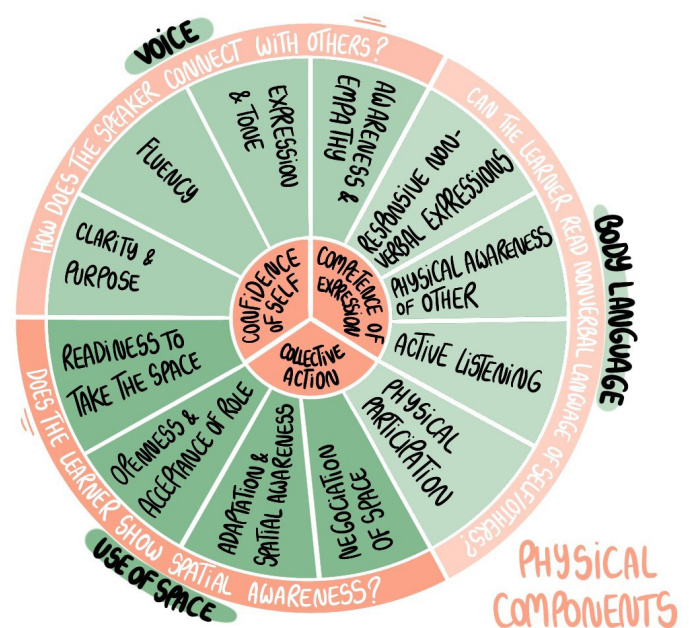
3. Physical component of learning:

Within the co-created Story Project Core elements of the physical strand were evidenced through the following dispositions (skills, attitudes and mind sets): *Awareness of self; Confidence of self; Competence of Expression; Readiness to learn; Active participation, Awareness of others; Responsiveness to others, Non-verbal communication, Embodiment* was a way to make meaning and foregrounded literacies and spoken language. (Stephenson, 2024)

The embodied dimension of learning was strongly expressed as an important aspect of learning by children which closely associated with a **sense of agency, imaginative freedom and increased meta-cognition.** "We make our stories, like we could choose groups together and we can make it with our body" Child testimony. For children this dimension was clearly related to increased memory and understanding of information.

"When you do drama and history after drama or a day after, it gets into your brain and there's this sort of glue which sticks it on, so it helps you remember how you're supposed to do it and what it's supposed to be" Child testimony

"Drama helps me remember stuff because I really enjoy doing actions and the actions can stay in your head." Child testimony



Children articulated the embodied dimension as a heightened and intense sense of engagement, participation which **fueled their inquiry and curiosity.** Children were ready to take the space, and to take action together.

Nonverbal communication, symbolism and space were important aspects of processing and exploring key complex issues for children.

Impact 2

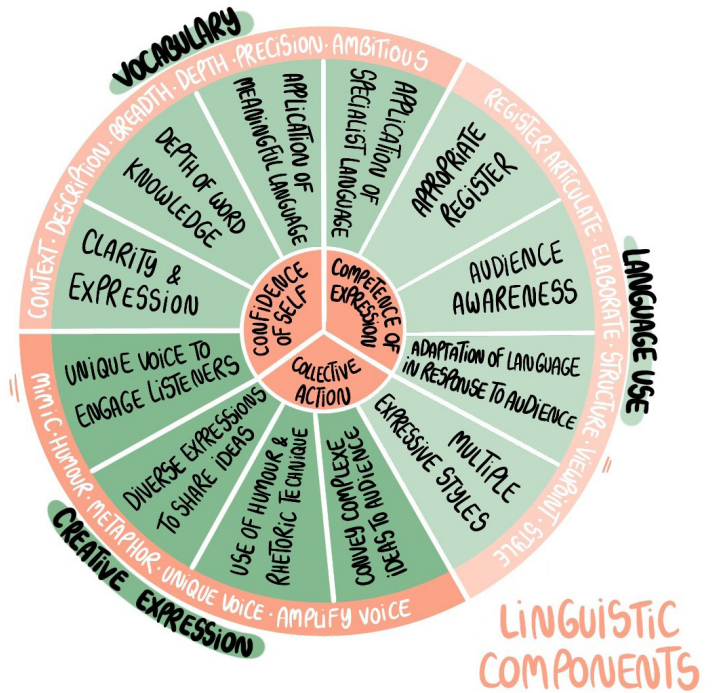
4. Linguistic component of learning:

Within the co-created Story Project Core elements of the linguistic strand were evidenced through the following dispositions: active engagement, curiosity, creative and cultural expressions.

There was a sense of collective expression
"It's like my imagination coming to life, and it's nice and relaxing. I sometimes think it's curious, what can happen next. And he (the artist) gives us exciting stops, like if we go into the story he stops there and he gives us the opportunity to finish that story" Child testimony.

"I think we're learning like with lots of different people instead of the exact same people. And I think we're learning about different scenarios each week, because it's good to learn about different scenarios for when you're older- if you don't learn different scenarios, you won't know how to react if the scenario happens." Child testimony

"I would like to say most of the progress that a lot of children made, especially those that were quite timid and quite shy, and they have so much more confidence in what they're saying, and what they're writing" Teacher testimony.



"Their ability to articulate themselves we've noticed a difference in that. I think that is a direct result of them taking part in the project." Teacher testimony



Artist Dan-Ingram-Brown working with children

Impact 3

What are the impacts of co-designing and implementing new, research informed pedagogy, curriculum and assessment on teacher's professional development?

100%
of teachers felt
that the project
had changed
their practice

100%
of teachers felt
more confident
to use creative
pedagogy

100%
of teachers felt
that the project had
impacted positively
their professional

1. Improved equitable learning opportunities, pupil voice and raised aspirations

"Child X and V could talk about their own life and what matters them and contribute to class with their own Gypsy stories and with their own Gypsy perception- the project has taught them to dare to dream." Parent testimony Parent Testomony

"Everything is so narrow, and I can really see this thinking process. I think the key take away will just be the fact that I can do it. I think at the beginning I was always quite hesitant." Teacher testimony

Teachers recounted aspects of learning which surprised them and challenged their perceptions of what they felt some children were capable of. This related to the impact on learning such as use of higher order vocabulary within story worlds, deeper social and emotional engagement, use of a greater range of language registers and nonverbal communication. Information was engaged with through higher order thinking and applied across different transdisciplinary contexts. Children demonstrated deeper understanding of humanities subjects.

2. Greater links made between home and school through the implementation of a localised, transdisciplinary curriculum.

"Anyway, we were thinking about how Bradford and Cliff Wood was at the time, which is really familiar to them as well so it's like thinking about their culture on the doorstep sort of thing. Because Bradford is their place, it's where they grew up." Teacher and Artist testimony.

"We do look at really difficult problems or you know, like hunger- the scenarios were putting in these children's minds, are really helping them inside and helping them outside" Teacher testimony.



Impact 3

3. Improved empirical evidence of social-emotional learning, communication and wellbeing driving school development plans and curriculum reform in schools.

Senior Leaders embedded the approach within localised school development plans more rigorously as the research impact on pupils' wellbeing and social emotional skills was evidenced in Year 2, particularly in relation to conflict resolution, wellbeing, and increased aspiration.

"Have a go at dealing with these kinds of difficult situations in this kind of safe environment and then be able to transfer those skills into real life- we believe that really links into their well-being by having these opportunities to practice confrontation and conflict and how they negotiate their way through life. So, it fits into our school development plan, we're redesigning our curriculum units as a result."

Senior Leader testimony

4. Improved professional practices and greater teacher self-efficacy through collaborative research and co-design

"I got so much out of it if you'd have asked me two years ago at the beginning of the of the project if I could see myself leading a workshop for students and leading staff meetings-now I feel that myself esteem has increased, I feel confident that I can plan my own unit of story curriculum and that will coincide with another subject. That's for me, that's huge progress."

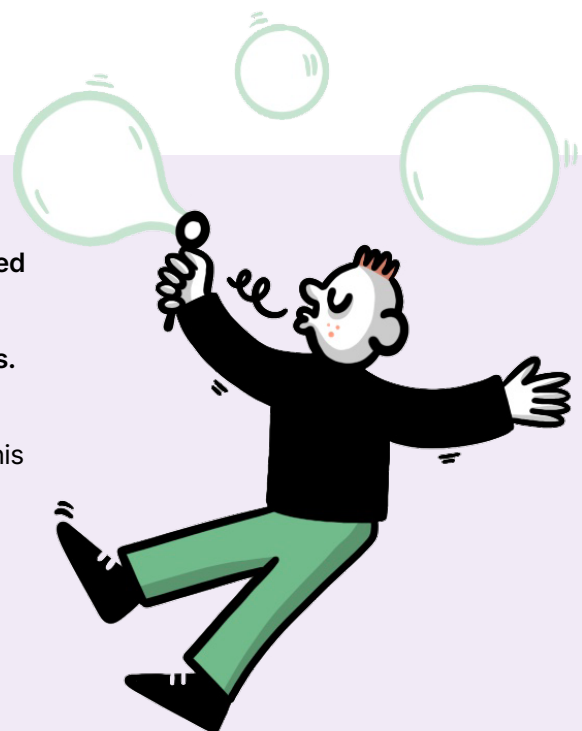
Teacher testimony.

"For me as well oracy... It's difficult, isn't it? Because although it's not just language and vocabulary it's the way that you feel, it's about relationships, and it's... I don't know. It's so broad I think the oracy thing. To be honest I really did come into the project at the beginning thinking that oracy was literally just language and that's changed, yes. So, the way that I think about oracy as well is it's not just language it's an umbrella of different things that we're looking at here. Oracy has been activated."

Teacher testimony

Recommendations:

1. Through application of Drama Worldbuilding many children exceeded expectations of teachers. Children were learning more, through multimodal literacies, communication and collective reasoning - discovering the power of their own individual and collective voices. This manifested as dispositional learning which was transferable across all curricular areas. Policy makers needs to engage with longitudinal empirical research which demonstrates the impact of this holistic approach to education.
2. Classroom pedagogy, assessment and curriculum **must move beyond static, monolingual practices** to value pedagogical approaches which draw from children's cultural practices. This has implication for education policy and teacher education.
3. Teachers and senior leaders need **time and support to embed new pedagogical approaches.**



Project outcomes and further impacts:

1 The research has fed into the Oracy Education Commission Curriculum Review. podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-commission-conversations-lisa-stephenson/id1739353277?i=1000662999358

2 The project was a Case study for OECD Futures of Education and Skills www.oecd.org/education/2030-project

3 6/7 of the schools have employed an artist for more time across another year. 6/7 of the schools are embedding the pedagogy further across classes within the schools.

4 1 school has embedded the use of drama pedagogy across all year groups (Reception-Year 6) through science.

5 1 of the schools is now using the drama for oracy pedagogy to teach pre-service teachers within their Skitt with teachers from the project leading professional development.

6 Senior Leaders from 4 schools have embedded the drama for oracy pedagogy within the school development plan because of the impact of project.

7 Resources, approaches, and insights from the Story Exchange project will shape further curriculum co-design across 9 Doncaster schools for Exceed Learning Partnership across 2 years. Teacher mentors will become Creative Pedagogy Leads.

8 The website will continue to collect testimonies and share practice as a further blended approach to CPD.

New Resources

1. Immersive website for teachers with curriculum resources: storyworlds.org.uk
2. Project Impact Documentaries (parents, teachers) storyworlds.org.uk/impact-gallery
3. Rewilding curriculum- International Story Makers conference for teachers to exchange practices www.storymakersco.com/events
4. Children's responses to project storyworlds.org.uk/impact-gallery/pupil-reflections-video

Research outputs and further reading

Stephenson, L. and Lofthouse, R., 2023. A pedagogy of professional noticing and co-inquiry: Embedding drama for oracy across the primary curriculum. *Impact. Chartered College of Teaching* 18. pp. 36-39. ISSN 2514-6955

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Stephenson, L. 2023. Collective creativity and wellbeing dispositions: Children's perceptions of learning through drama. *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 47:101188. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2022.101188>

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Teacher Development Fund Newsletter: Empowering Pupil Voice Through Drama <https://www.phf.org.uk/empowering-pupil-voice-through-drama/>



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