Collective creativity and wellbeing dispositions: Children's perceptions of learning through drama

Lisa Stephenson

Leeds Beckett University, Address: Leeds Beckett University, Headingley Campus, 125 Carnegie Hall, Leeds, LS6 3QS, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

At a time of escalating global climate change and political, educational, social, and economic divides, children face uncertainties about their futures. This is set against a rise in poor wellbeing and mental health amongst children. Whilst global organisations such as OECD Learning Compass 2030 and UNESCO Framework for Action 2030, provide normative discourses on the global skills, knowledge and attitudes that should be taught to equip young people to become 'change agents', this is yet to be reflected in educational policy in England. Central to addressing empirical gaps in research, is the exploration the impact of children's affective engagement in creative arts learning. Drawing from longitudinal action research as an artist–teacher–researcher in a primary school, the practice of Drama Worldbuilding is explored as a pedagogy of critical hope because it focuses on activating collective creativity and purposeful action. The research draws from theories of affect, wellbeing and immersive play to conceptualise new links between creativity, change making and wellbeing. The data analysis reveals a set of emerging creativity and wellbeing dispositions and adaptable competencies which support a deeper articulation of how creative pedagogy works through *meta- affect*. More widely, the research provides a heuristic approach which could be useful for teachers and artist educators interested in expanding their teaching repertoires, fostering students' collective creativity and critical thinking, offering a potential pedagogical space for rewilding the curriculum.

1. Introduction

"There is an urgent need to understand creativity to enable young people to handle the uncertainties of life and equally teachers need to expand their repertoire of pedagogical practice in order to nurture learners' creativity" (Cremin & Chappell, 2019, p.3).

At a time of technological advancement, escalating global climate change and political, educational, social, and economic divides, children face uncertainties about their futures. This is reflected in worrying reports about the deterioration in young people's mental health and wellbeing (Cowburn & Blow, 2017; WHO, 2019) which has increased from one in nine young people to one in six, following Covid (Newlove-Delgado et al, 2021).

Education has a vital role equipping learners to respond to these social, technological and environmental challenges. In considering a normative discourse on the global skills, knowledge and attitudes that should be taught, the OECD Learning Compass 2030 advocates a broader range of meta-cognitive skills and competencies to broaden educational scope (OECD, 2019, p.3) and prepare learners for a future as 'change agents.' Positioned as a roadmap for educational reform, the report highlights the importance of learner and teacher

agency, of taking responsibility and reconciling tensions and dilemma, relating wellbeing to social connections and active engagement (ibid). The creative arts are highlighted as promoting meta-cognitive ability. Comparatively, UNESCO's 2030 (2015) use of 'global citizenship' implies a focus on multiculturalism, activism, and an engaged curriculum. It is noted that both reports lack guidance on *how* these relational principles relate to pedagogy and the OECD is critiqued for an over focus on disciplinary learning (Hughson & Wood 2022). In stark contrast, narrowing educational policy in England has progressively compromised most areas of relational learning in favour of memorisation (Ball, 2018).

In addressing the relationship between educational policy, curriculum and schooling, policy sociologists such as Whitty (2010) advocate the power of pedagogical choice. Creative arts pedagogy operates from a unique set of principles which activates emotional sensibilities and cultural references through the imagination. There is an empirical need to interrogate the pedagogical features and impact of creative learning through the inclusion of learners' perspectives (Davies et al., 2013; Cremin & Chappell, 2019) and this paper argues that a focus on *affect* is necessary to understand more about *how* learners participate in meaning making. Utilising action research undertaken over eighteen months in an English primary school (PhD, Anon, 2022), this paper systematically explores children's perceptions of relational learning through drama praxis. In doing so, it draws from interdisciplinary theories of affect (Massumi, 2015), immersive play (Norris, 2013; Colvert, 2018), wellbeing and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2013) to understand how diverse learners make meaning in response to each other.

Theoretically, this paper also draws from the emerging philosophy of critical hope (Danvers, 2014, Zembylas, 2015) to examine drama as a relational pedagogy, highlighting the links between collective creativity and wellbeing. Critical hope is not viewed as a naïve sense of hope based on a wish that things will get better but is based *on cultivating purposeful collective action* through the social imagination. The practice of *Drama Worldbuilding* is examined as a pedagogy of critical hope because it focuses on activating collective creativity and purposeful action within story worlds.

1.1. English education policy landscape

In relation to agency and wellbeing, the recent Durham Commission on Creativity (2019) also raised concerns about how hard it is for children 'to make positive decisions about their own lives and about the world they want to see,' highlighting the need to 'equip children as imaginative and critical thinkers' (ibid p.5). The report highlighted the many areas of 'untapped potential' linked to creative learning which are yet to be articulated and implemented in any form of educational policy. Furthermore, the lack of equitable access to creative and cultural opportunities for children both in and out of school is highlighted as 'a social justice issue,' linking arts education to social mobility (Paul Hamlyn Report).

In their systematic literature review of creative learning environments, Davies et al. (2013) highlight the importance of school culture as an enabling factor in children's and teachers' creative engagement. The policy landscape in the United Kingdom is fragmented, with Wales and Scotland explicitly recognising wellbeing and creativity as areas of learning in statutory components of the Primary National Curriculum. England, in contrast has a narrower approach to these areas of learning. These pressures have led to the marginalisation of many areas linked to creativity and the arts, personal, social and emotional education (PHSE) and the recent relationship curriculum due to a lack of time, prioritisation and expertise. Drama has been moved into various places within the English Primary National Curriculum with minimal guidance compared to other subject areas. It has been argued that teachers in England are the most accountable in the world (Leat et al., 2013). Going further, Ball (2018) describes the current state of English education as 'muddlesome' (ibid, p207), as teachers feel 'compromised, and children are increasingly stressed with low levels of individual wellbeing and without a sense of purpose which reaches beyond examination grades' (Ball, 2018, p234).

Although there is some movement in the English primary curriculum (DfE, 2015) regarding delivering teaching in a bespoke way, there is little guidance for teachers on how to navigate between accountability and data-driven values in education policy and creative learning. Involvement in action research has been seen to support this change (Davis, 2013) offering an opportunity to empower teachers' professional agency over their pedagogical choices.

1.2. Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a 'slippery concept' (Hall and Thompson, 2017). Broadly speaking it refers to the quality of a person's life and is acknowledged globally as an essential component of holistic flourishing:

> *"Mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community" (WHO, 2019).*

In relation to wellbeing policy in England, the government green paper on mental health (DfE, 2017) was accused of 'failing a generation of children' and heavily critiqued for being 'not ambitious enough', rolling out the support plans to only 'a fifth to a quarter of the country by 2022/23' (House of Commons report 2018). Within schools, poor mental health was related to the contributing factors of a narrowing curriculum, social media and exam pressure (ibid). In response, the paper advocated a more widespread implementation and iterative learning methods to inform best practice. Whilst there is increasing guidance and advice for schools which advocates the development of whole-school preventative factors to support children by fostering a sense of belonging and

control (Department of Education, 2016), there is little or no support regarding how to implement this through pedagogy. It can be argued that a sense of control is not just about emotional regulation but also the ability to foster individual and collective actions in challenging times.

Oracy, also a critical component of verbal and nonverbal communication has been side-lined as non-statutory in English education policy. Much like creativity, Oracy is difficult to measure and evidence in neo-liberalist terms. Research shows that teachers lack professional support and understanding in this area (Millard & Menzies, 2016). This too, has wider implications for the development of holistic learning which enable children to flourish in diverse societies. One of the reasons why oracy is so undervalued in education policy in England, is a tendency to only view it as social and not also cultural, cognitive (Myatt, 2018) and embodied. Moreover, lack of time and lack of teacher confidence have limited opportunities to engage, rehearse and build confidence in the skills associated with rich dialogic talk (Alexander, 2012) which are central to active participation and relational meaning making.

1.3. Wellbeing, collective creativity and change making

Links between creativity, wellbeing and pupil agency have been documented through research (Anon & Dobson 2020), however education lacks coherent research into what creative pedagogies are and what they do. Definitions of creativity in education vary, from supporting economic growth and innovation through government ideology and policy (Davis, 2013), to highlighting the importance of everyday creativity (Jeffrey & Craft, 2006; Lucas & Claxton, 2013; Lucas & Spencer, 2020). Whilst acknowledging the benefits of creative thinking for the economy, understanding of the cultural, material and social relationships and processes that shape everyday creativity as an important site for children's contemporary learning are needed.

Collective creativity centres on collaboration, communication and divergent thinking (Tang et al,2020). Despite a focus on collective creativity within industry, education still maintains a largely individualised focus on creativity and problem solving. A focus on *collective creativity* is also vital in understanding affective meaning making. This research focuses on exploring the following definition of creativity and imaginative play in order to expand pedagogical, methodological and theoretical understanding of the links between collective creativity and wellbeing.

> *"To be creative means to be in a state of opening to the unknown, a place of possibilities, a place that a positive environment offers"* (Norris, 2012, p300).

The notion of being *open to the unknown* and embracing change and possibility as principles of creative pedagogy, collective creativity, wellbeing warrants further research.

1.4. Theoretical underpinning

Future challenges are unknown, and children will need to collectively respond, drawing from a range of creative life skills, competencies and dispositions that may not be in textbooks. Rather than an initial focus on competencies, this research explicitly focuses on the relationship between dispositions and transferable competencies. The word disposition is used in this research to describe our tendencies to respond to situations in certain ways that *incorporate* affects, emotions, sensibilities that cultivate creative thinking. Affect is conceptualised as a felt embodied state that is generated through relational encounters which are experienced together (Ahmed, 2014). Affective forces (such as a sense of belonging or control) can drive or hinder motivation and participation in particular ways. Theoretically, affective spaces of possibility and our openness to them are seen as 'margin of manoeuvrability' (Massumi, 2015, p3) and indicate our *openness* to the unknown and this in term affects out capacity to respond effectively. Our affective states are activated in specific ways in relation to learning. Meta-affect refers to affect about affect and had applied to research about anxiety in maths (DeBellis, & Goldin, 2006). It refers to thinking about feelings and is applied theoretically in this research to analyse how drama activates learning.

This paper also builds on research from creative partnerships (McLellan et al, 2012a), which uses Self-determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2012,) to make links between wellbeing, affect and creativity noting that a curriculum which affords choice, autonomy, self-motivation and self-efficacy promotes wellbeing through increased motivation. The theory proposes that human beings have three innate psychological needs called *competence* (feeling affective in social environments, experiencing opportunities to express capabilities); *autonomy* (being the perceived source of your own behaviour); and *relatedness* (having a sense of belonging, connectedness to communities, and wanting to care for people and be cared for).

1.5. Drama pedagogy as agentic learning

Creativity can be utilised across all areas of learning, the expressive arts, however, operate using a unique set of pedagogical principles which value and activate children's participation, emotional sensibilities and cultural references as rich learning resources. Crucially, this view of education values their knowledge as children because it encourages openness of multiple perspectives expressed in multiple ways. Drama pedagogy as an expressive art can be thought of as emotion in action, focussing on creating and exploring stories, activating social and emotional skills in relation to making and doing. Children are called to action within story worlds to

actively engage in social problem solving together. They are challenged to negotiate positions, decisions and actions responsibly, which involves active listening and responding to the fictional community. It is therefore a pedagogical tool for activating relational learning because it is driven by *dialogic inquiry (*Edmiston, 2015) and active participation. Oracy is repositioned within this pedagogy as encompassing complex components of cognitive, linguistic, aural, verbal and emotional ways of knowing as embodied learning (Branscombe & Schneider, 2014). Children have choice in how to respond, both individually and collectively. Working imaginatively in this way activates children's cultural references, linking home and school worlds. It is therefore driven by communication and connections, inviting a sense of openness and movement to act (Massumi, 2015).

Ethically, this view of learning positions children as capable political, social and active agents and recognises that they are not just a homogeneous group but are able to express their values, views and aspirations, which are linked to a flourishing life. Agency is understood as the opportunity to open up spaces of critical action (Sen, 1993) and our will and capacity to act within those spaces (Zembylas, 2015). This applies to both teacher and learner. As research praxis, drama pedagogy flips the current narrative in educational policy without underplaying the problems, hardships and injustices which are faced by some children by "concentrating less on what children can't do and indeed how much more they can do if we allow and empower them to do so" (Alexander, 2008, p8). It also offers new pedagogical openings for teachers to recognise relational learning through the following research questions.

1 *How can dramatic inquiry support children's learning and wellbeing in the 21st century?*
2 *How is knowledge produced through these workshops?*

2. Methodology

This PhD action research case study (Punch & Oancea, 2014) drew from my drama practice as a visiting artist-teacher-researcher (Springgay et al, 2008) in a primary school over eighteen months and was designed to provide a 'thick description' (Geertz, 2008) of relational learning over time.

2.1. Participants

The drama workshops took place with thirty children aged nine to ten years old, participating on a weekly basis for one and a half hours during an academic year from September 2017 to July 2018. This was integrated into normal curriculum timetabling. There were thirteen boys and seventeen girls in the group, and their ethnic backgrounds were different. In addition, three children were new to English, a further two had English as an additional language and two children had complex special educational needs. The school's Ofsted reports (2007, 2010, 2017) describe the primary school as a 'larger-than-average inner-city school in the North of England which 'serves a mixed community that includes an area of significant social and economic disadvantage'.

2.2. Ethics and permissions

Ethical clearance was undertaken in line with British Education Research Association guidelines (2018). This included gatekeeper consent being given by the headteacher and the teacher consenting to participate in the project as well as parental consent. Children's verbal assent was given at the start of the project and parents were informed about the project via the school newsletter so that it was made clear that all participants had the right to withdraw. Strict data protection guidelines and anonymity were adhered to in order to protect vulnerable children.

2.3. Creative measures

A range of creative methods were utilised to explore and cross reference the affective experiences of the participants. In doing so, the research seeks to address the 'method-critiques' of practitioner action research (Cochlan-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p46).

Reflective journals were kept by both the children and myself throughout the project and were used in, after and between sessions freely. Workshop materials such as drawings, materials and objects were generated during drama workshop sessions and utilised as attitudinal data, creating a more naturalistic setting for the inquiry, as this was part of children's timetabled school routine. The workshop sessions were videoed.

Focused conversations: The use of semi-structured focused conversations (Loughran, 2006) was embedded into workshops as part of the collaborative, participatory and dialogic nature of action research. The articulation of this method as a focused or critical conversation (ibid) rather than an interview alludes to the relaxed and informal nature of these whole class reflections, where my role was more of a facilitator who encouraged free movement between questions. Children responded in journals and these whole class reflections were videoed.

Additionally, focused conversations were repeated (Roos, 2021) at three key points during the academic year using the same semi-structured questions which focussed on children's feelings and understanding of learning within the sessions (Appendix A). These took place in December (7 children randomly selected) and February (7 children randomly selected) and then two focused conversations were conducted in July (15 children in each group). The sampling of children from the class was done randomly by the class

teacher and not the researcher, to develop a cross-section of responses and included mixed abilities, genders and ethnicities. The conversations happened in non-classroom spaces free from distractions each for 45 min. This later repetition of conversations was carried out with two separate groups of children so that if responses were led by each other in the first conversation, the latter group would have the space to express a different perspective ensuring reliability and validity.

2.4. Researcher positionality

From the children's perspective, I was seen as a visiting artist and playmaker within drama, and this power dynamic enabled children to talk more freely about their perceptions of the learning. This emerged clearly in the data when children spoke of being less worried about saying the 'right thing' in drama. My positionality as an artist-teacher-researcher and not the regular class teacher, was therefore helpful in gaining authentic insider responses as a researcher, as I already had established a rapport with children and could maintain a critical inquiry stance.

2.5. Ethics and trustworthiness

Drama pedagogy always involves important ethical considerations and implications, for example children's involvement, because they are experiencing different ways of being in school, may be challenging or even unsettling, and it was my responsibility, as the drama practitioner, to frame the learning and experiences in ways which both protected and challenged them. The wellbeing of the children, however, was always of utmost importance, and I also had a responsibility to align my practice with the school's ethics and protection policies.

Integral to drama pedagogy is the use of strategies for 'protection into emotion' (Bolton 1984, Eriksson, 2011) which are key components of pedagogical practice. Ethics is always situated in drama pedagogy through a reflexive cycle. Fundamental to this are responsiveness to and with children and critical awareness of my own subjectivities when framing stories in response to diverse children. Ethics and the assent of children were therefore ongoing through these drama practices, as children experienced a sense of choice and agency through their positioning in the workshops.

Authenticity and credibility were reinforced through continual feedback with the children through artefacts generated during the sessions. These built-in self-reflexive processes provided a way to check the accuracy of my analysis and challenge my own positionality and preconceived ideas (Drake, 2010).

2.6. Data analysis

The following analyses were carried out in relation to the data sets.

1 Thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994, 2015); of my drama practice and children's and teachers' perceptions of the learning through video observation and journal reflections.
2 Thematic analysis of children's focused conversations at three different times across the year.

Initially, the interview transcripts were analysed using descriptions of reoccurring themes and their frequency, taking an inductive approach to the emerging perceptions of children. The thematic descriptions were then coded inferentially (ibid) and grouped into further deductive themes which were compared across the year and linked to theoretical frames of affect and wellbeing using an abductive approach. This coding was undertaken manually, and the double coding ensured reliability. This was mapped against my own pedagogical structuring of the drama workshops called Drama Worldbuilding. The double coding of the data aimed to explore the ways in which children made collective and individual meaning together in the workshops in order to ensure reliability.

Video analysis of the workshops was also coded in order to analyse children's affective engagement in the drama by coding the patterns of nonverbal behaviour. This involved identifying the affective processes that were present in the Drama Worldbuilding workshops, collating the embodied data which was produced and thematically and visually making sense of the data (Knudsen and Stage, 2015). The incorporation of multiple methods of analysis gave the data exploration depth and rigour, therefore avoiding criticism that inductive approaches to analysis lack these elements (Mirza et al., 2014). This affective mapping whilst acknowledged here, is expanded more in subsequent papers.

3. Materials and procedure

3.1. Drama Worldbuilding

Drama pedagogy was used as a method of participatory action research because it *opened* classroom space for a particular form of participatory embodied dialogue and inquiry. The focus of the workshops was initially negotiated with the class teacher, covering six 'topics' across the eighteen months, for example the children were covering the topic of the Mayans and so I based drama workshops around this area of learning. As a pedagogical approach to this story, I set this learning experience around two fictional children living in Mayan communities who were at war with each other. The children built their own roles and identities within these communities to

discover that the children in these opposing communities were friends. They were challenged to navigate this dilemma within the story world whilst still applying factual knowledge gained from history lessons on the Mayans. I call this approach Drama Worldbuilding, because it is a deeply relational pedagogy where emotions and affects are activated, expressed and negotiated. Within these sessions, children reflected on this learning both in and out of the fiction. During the creative process, children worked holistically using their bodies, graphics, materials, sound, and free writing both collectively and individually. For example, through the drama structure of a tableau, children used gesture, body position, touch and expression to create a frozen scene. Pedagogically, this encouraged multi-modality and diverse expressions of literacies. The use of thought journals was integral.

Each workshop was split into three pedagogical components called i*nvitation, exploration and discovery.* The Invitation component of the session included the use of game and play to establish safe spaces for practicing skills such as observation, reading emotion, active listening for both drama practitioner and child. Children were 'invited' into the fiction by using inquiry questions such as *What if…* or *Let's say…*

> *Let's say that you lived a long time ago at the time of the Mayans. You had many skills and knew how to live off the land…*

Several drama techniques were used to activate collaborative working as children were challenged to create their own collective and individual fictional identities. This investment in time aimed to attribute space for building belief and community within the fictional worlds (Davis, 2014). Each drama explored a social dilemma where children were challenged to collaboratively problem solve. Often, these affective moments were activated using drama strategies such teacher in role (Heathcote 1990) which involved a reversal of power, where I was positioned as a character who was vulnerable and needed help from the children. These dilemmas were negotiated by the children through the 'exploration' and 'discovery' components of the workshop**.**

3.2. Overview of findings

Fig. 1 maps my signature pedagogy (Hall & Thompson, 2016) used to frame the relational learning. Children were moving back and forward between exploring ideas within the fiction and critically reflecting. It is articulated as a 'flexible structure' rather than a lesson plan as it is dialogically divergent, responsive and fluid. The *inquiry tools* listed around the outside of Fig. 1, are observed effects or
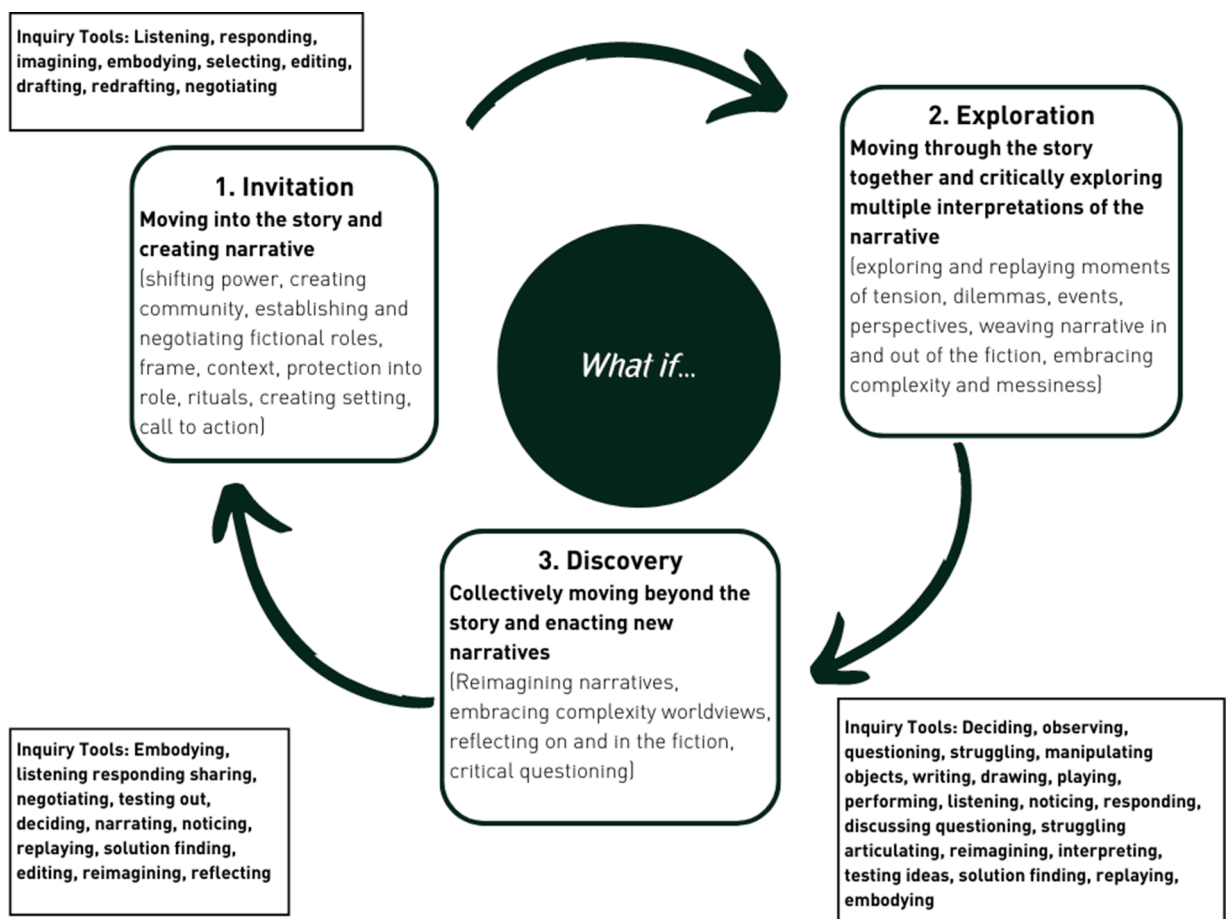
Fig. 1. Drama Worldbuilding components and observed inquiry tools.

engagement and actions taken by children within the workshops. These were coded manually following video analysis of the workshops and cross referenced with data analysis from the focussed conversations with children.

3.3. Children's perceptions of learning

Initial coding of themes and key words were generated across the three focused conversations with children over eighteen months. The imagination had the highest word frequency with 47 mentions, followed by stress by 9 mentions. Further inferential thematic analysis looked at connecting themes and theoretical links across data sets and produced eight key themes, namely:

1 agency and openness to *thinking-feeling* and acting with others,
2 displacement from reality and emotional regulation,
3 positive feelings, wellbeing and embracing risk,
4 collectively embracing conflict, struggle and negotiation,
5 imaginative freedom,
6 self-efficacy and confidence,
7 teamwork and belonging,
8 critical thinking, embodied learning.

Fig. 2, maps the key words coded from focused conversations with children which represent their affective responses in relation to the drama pedagogy. and which underpinned the eight dispositions.

Fig. 2. Eight affective dispositions of wellbeing and creativity.

4. Discussions

Expanded in more detail below, the analyses show the ways that dispositions shifted and changed across the midpoint conversations and end point conversations eight months later and were driven by affective engagement.

1 A sense of agency and openness to thinking and feeling with others

> *"The most important thing for me is to use YOUR imagination and to participate but the most important thing is that we all get to do everything."* Child B

The first disposition that emerged from the children's perceptions of the workshops is *an openness to thinking, feeling and acting with others.* There is a sense at the midpoint conversations that the workshops provided a valued opportunity for the children's own personal ideas and imagination to be expressed. Personal ideas and emotion were valued and that this was not the usual classroom experience. This was also linked to using *'your bodies to learn'* as a making-meaning process, and we can sense the importance of personal, embodied and ethical participation. *Agency* is linked to feelings of everyone having choice and being heard, which are valued and seen as *'an opportunity'*. This aligns with agency being concerned with having a right to imaginative freedom (Sens, 1999), but the end point conversations articulate the application of choice to collective actions and democratic decision making in the drama. A *sense of trust and belonging* emerge in the group. This is evident across the conversation sets and was articulated by the children in response to questions asking what they enjoy about drama and what they think they are learning, suggesting that the children now value making these collective decisions independently and feel a sense of enjoyment when they do so.

2 Displacement from reality

> Child D: "*That nobody is ever wrong. Like sometimes I get really angry but because I have been doing drama it calms me down.*"

The second theme emerged very strongly from children's reflections. At the midpoint of the data collection conversations, when asked about how drama makes them feel and what they think they are learning, the children's responses linked to expression and freedom, but their affective responses were overwhelmingly linked to displacement of stress from real life and displacement from reality. There were repeated references to the idea that in drama there is no right and wrong. This was reiterated by other children and suggests a kind of acceptance and confidence that have grown in response to this feeling of having freedom to speak. These feelings were also associated with the replacing of *'anger', 'sadness' 'worry', 'stress', 'bad things',* with more positive emotions such as *fun*, as well as a sense of escapism. The idea that for some children drama is a motivator for going to school was also impactful. Further articulations by children express a sense of *'letting other people in'* to regulate negative feelings and *sharing* a worry as a way of reducing anxiety. It is clear to see the *sense of community* emerging from these critical reflections from children. The later articulations in July concerning displacing negative feelings through drama show a more sophisticated articulation of how and why this happens. This includes a sense of feeling that the drama process matters to these children; there is a sense that the children value it, that they have an increased awareness of how they feel, and that drama affects their wellbeing in a positive way.

This are empirical examples of *meta- affect* where negative feelings are used to drive learning in new, affirmative ways. A sense of wellbeing comes from sharing, being listened to and having the chance to create somewhere in the drama space- a form of control. The imagination becomes an important factor in going somewhere where *'anything can happen'*. Increased emotional regulation is shown through new engagement and attitudes towards to school.

3 Positive feelings and wellbeing

> *"In normal lessons you can't really express yourself but in drama you can build up your confidence and express your feelings to other people."* Child P

Children's feelings initially focused on drama being *fun, free* and *hard*. This is linked to being able to share feelings collectively in an accepting space. Tensions and challenges are expressed in relation to working like this, explored in theme 4. There is a sense that the drama space gives permission to share these feelings, which is not normal in standard lessons. This is expressed as shared engagement and participation – a collective activity. It is also articulated as related to confidence – the confidence that comes from sharing.

In the later conversations, children explored and articulated more sophisticated understandings of why they felt a certain way. Unexpected and spontaneous learning moments when you *'never know what might happen'* were associated with excitement, challenge, opportunity, possibility and focus. A *sense of purpose and belief* is reflected in the ways in which children articulated the drama learning. Positive feelings and affective states in the later conversations were also strongly linked to a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, group connectedness and aspiration as well as to spaces in which to try new things and play out self-identity in different ways. This aligns with Massumi's conceptualisation of affect as potential or *'margins of manoeuvrability'* (ibid, p3) in any one moment and the idea that uncertainty can be empowering, especially when embraced collectively.

4 Conflict and negotiation

> Child L: *I think it's when some group start arguing about what you should do and what you shouldn't do and then it really affects when you have to perform because you have nothing.*

Initially, comments to do with disliking drama were to do with group conflict, feeling left out and off-task behaviour and happened at the midpoint of a conversation, moving away from initial ideas about drama just being about having fun. Group conflict mainly consists of affective states such as not being listened to, not being with friends, fairness and being off task, which manifest as frustration. Many moments are spent working things out or struggling to work through the complexities of coming to a shared agreement about something during the workshops. It is interesting that children still maintain a *sense of investment here* as they want to have something to *perform*.

> Child M: *Just stay yourself and… be yourself and don't copy anyone else and be weak.*

In later conversations in which children were asked the repeat question, shows that students were still experiencing difficulty in these negotiated spaces but can offer explanations of how they overcame some of the issues of democratic group engagement as their drama experiences deepen. Again, there is a shift from feelings as negative states to feelings associated with a language of actions and decisions. Interestingly, the later conversations demonstrate that children were not only able to give examples of how they practised active listening and democratic citizenship but could express some confidence about '*being themselves*' and a sense that following the group was '*weak*'. The idea of '*uniqueness*' is interesting and demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of valuing difference as opposed to sameness, and the idea of 'staying yourself' and 'to act' suggest both self-efficacy and resistance to being open to change. Later conversations suggest that this democratic listening was still ongoing and difficult for the children. Again, there is a *sense of purpose* and growing confidence here associated with individual and collective action in struggle. There is also a *sense of investment* in sorting things out and finding solutions.

5 Imaginative freedom

The greatest response to any focused conversations with the children was an articulation of the importance of the imagination (47 mentions across conversations). None of the focused conversations involved asking specific questions about the imagination. Initially, imagination was linked to ownership, freedom and expression (affect) as it is a way to have fun and create or learn new things. *This sense of freedom* was linked to experiencing things that were beyond the everyday through the imagination, and *there is a sense of embracing* this as important.

> Child S*: Well sometimes I feel that I can't use my imagination properly and then in drama I can because you can share your ideas and get to use your imagination more and I can actually be positive more about my imagination.*

> Child T: *It's different as you have use your imagination more and it actually gives you more ideas that the other lessons. It's also similar to the other lessons because you are still learning things as well in a different way. You learn yourself instead of being taught it by someone else.*

During the later focused conversations, the children's discourse around imagination focused on the effects of imaginative thinking, which included thinking of '*better ways of doing things*', and an understanding that through imaginative dramatic learning you learn in '*different ways*', '*see what it was like*' and think about '*better things*'. There is a shift from '*learning new things*' to '*thinking of better things*' over time. This also suggests an understanding of the ways in which reimagining can offer other critical reflections. What is of key importance here is that children, rather than adults, are making valued and informed judgements about what counts as '*better*'. These are embodied responses because children have felt them within the process of drama worldbuilding. Clearly, the children value imaginative learning and articulate the ways in which it brings learning to life. They are able to articulate that they are learning in different ways.

The later conversations also clearly articulate the ways in which children felt that their imaginative learning is not nurtured in school and that they have previously worried that their imagination is not *good enough in* 'normal work'. This is a worrying admission. Children reflect on '*learning to use*' their imaginations through the workshops, suggesting that this is a new skill and experience. These statements highlight the critical use of the imagination in relation to children's wellbeing. There is a *sense of criticality, self-autonomy and self-efficacy* here.

6 Self-efficacy and confidence

> Child R: *I would like to do more because I have never had this much confidence before and expressed my feelings to other people.*

> Child L: *It builds up your self-esteem when you have low self-esteem and you feel that you are worthless, and you go to drama and you forget you had a low self-esteem.*

Initially there was a sense that for many children, being told that there was no right or wrong answer in the drama workshop was an important part of enabling them to feel like sharing their ideas. This *sense of acceptance* and tolerance enabled feelings to be opened. The extracts highlight the children's view of drama as a *safe space* in which to escape from reality and forget, and discourses related to feelings of low self-esteem were consistent across the initial interviews. The children were engaged in mental health week at school during this time, which may have contributed to this articulation.

> Child E: *I think it helps everyone to share ideas and to know that everyone's ideas are important.*

Later reflections show a clear sense of growth in personal confidence and renewed aspiration. This often manifested in an

encouraging call out to other children to *share* their ideas and also to be confident and positive about what they think. There seems to be an emerging understanding and valuing of collective action and increased tolerance indicating that a *sense of community and belonging* was linked to children's wellbeing. For some students, frustrations concerning group work still exist but there is a much stronger articulation of why they should overcome initial feelings of dislike and how to do this.

7 Teamwork and Belonging

Lisa, drama practitioner: *What do you dislike about drama*?

Child M: *When there are two groups and 1 group has like your best friend and like and you want to be with them but you can't because you are in two different groups.*

The sense of connectedness and friendship was expressed as an important part of the drama experience for children, and initially there is a sense of not being open to others in the group. Some children clearly expressed frustration about off-task behaviour and being placed in 'non-friendship' groups. Over time, there is a clear move from wanting to work in teams and with friends to an understanding that all ideas matter, which is highlighted in the extracts below.

Child L: *I feel happy because you don't do it on your own, get to do teamwork and you get to go into groups to figure out ideas, like when we did the gibbons you had to use your imagination to think of ideas about how to fix the violence in the zoo and stuff. I enjoyed that.*

The children elaborated on how they solved issues relating to *feeling left out*, providing active and democratic solutions as well as using the ways in which they worked together to solve social problems within the drama. The sense of working and playing with new friends was an important reflection for children in the later workshops and '*working things out together*' was important. Within this category there are clear examples of active compassion in relation to group problem solving. This was linked to positive feelings of wellbeing, including happiness and enjoyment. There was a clear sense of children valuing *collective care* in the later conversations.

8 Embodied learning and critical thinking

Child L: *I think it is different because normal lessons you just sit down with your books, get an input and write down everything that the teachers says but in drama you draw you don't just sit down you move about and I think that it is different because it's much more fun.*

Initially, there was an articulation of being 'told' how to be creative and not being able to move around. Children had a clear sense that learning should be about moving around, drawing, personal choice and freedom and that creativity was '*good for the brain*' and was a way of experiencing new things. There is a clear sense from this extract of children valuing embodied learning as a way of making meaning. Feelings of fun, happiness and confidence were linked to expressing feelings and working collaboratively.

Child I: *When we are in normal lessons, we don't have enough time to let our imagination flow. We always have to be quiet, and we are not allowed to talk but in drama we have different rules and we are allowed to talk and let our imagination flow.*

Child E: *I think it's good because you work in a team and come up with ideas. In other lessons you get told you HAVE to do things. In drama it's different as you have used your imagination more and it actually gives you more ideas that the other lessons. It's also similar to the other lessons because you are still learning things as well in a different way. You learn yourself instead of being taught it by someone else.*

In later conversations, children articulated a sophisticated understanding of how embodied learning was experienced, via time and focus. The mention of having time to let imagination '*flow*' suggests an affective intensity of the learning (Massumi, 2015). Clearly, investing in imaginative learning required time, and many of the reflections articulated perceptions of being able to concentrate more '*on things in my head*' and increased idea generation through drama. Children also reflected on feeling '*worried/struggling*' about '*getting their imagination wrong*' in normal schoolwork but valued the freedom to learn in different ways. They were also able to articulate the importance of '*allowing time for*' teamwork, listening, kindness and democratic talk and the reasons why this was important. There is also an awareness of taking action/making agentic decisions autonomously and collectively. The children's critiques of 'normal lessons' illuminate the ways in which opportunities for dialogic talk, imaginative freedom and autonomy were considered marginalised. The relationships between policy, pedagogy and curriculum are critically highlighted (Bernstein, 1981) through the children's perspectives on learning.

4.1. Discussions: wellbeing and empowerment through collective creativity

The first research question set out to investigate the ways that drama worldbuilding could support 21st Century learning. The eight themes highlighted by the children are underpinned by a need for connectedness, caring and collaboration- wellbeing and creativity were intrinsically linked. Over time, the focused conversations highlighted relational learning which developed a sense of agency, empowerment and autonomy in learners – collectively and individually. The second research question set out to investigate how children *made* meaning. Collective creativity was seen as embodied as children were challenged to engage in active listening and practise taking affirmative action within fictional worlds. By their own admission and in response to a narrowing policy landscape, the imagination is seen as an 'enabling factor' (Davies, 2013) which is often restricted in school.

The Eight Wellbeing Dispositions clearly map and expand the three components from self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan

2000): *competence* (feeling affective in social environments, experiencing opportunities to express capabilities), *autonomy* (being the perceived source of one's behaviour) and *relatedness* (having a sense of belonging, connectedness to communities, wanting to care and be cared for). The mapping of dispositions highlights the need for relational processes which support learners in *becoming open* through sharing, expressing, emotional regulation, struggle and active compassion. The drama worldbuilding pedagogy is seen to enable opportunities to practise active compassion and solidarity in a non-judgmental and playful space. This values notions of both difference and similarity, where both can exist in negotiation. **Table 1** maps the progression of dispositions across time highlighting the **impact** of learning.

4.2. Dialogic inquiry, oracy and democratic thinking

Interestingly, there was a clear parallel between my experience of using practitioner-inquiry as action research, and the inquiry, communication and oracy tools that children were developing as they moved through the three Drama Worldbuilding components. These communication tools were observed across data sets and are mapped in Fig. 1, highlighting children's emerging inquiry stance as they work through the Worldbuilding structure. These observed *inquiry tools* present a more sophisticated engagement in Oracy which

Table 1
Emerging learning through creativity and wellbeing dispositions.

8 Wellbeing Dispositions	Phase 1 Progression of characteristics (Conversations 6 months- *children's responses*)	Phase 2 Progression of Characteristics (Conversations 12 months- children's responses)	Enabling Factors through Drama Worldbuilding: Sense of community Sense of purpose Sense of freedom Sense of belonging Sense of investment	Learning Progression across time, links to wellbeing (*competence, autonomy* and *relatedness*)
A sense of agency and openness to others	Expressing, sharing emotions, using your imagination,	Debating, deciding on actions, not judging, openness to range of perspectives, building trust, making shared decisions without adults.	Sense of trust, participation (individual and collective), belonging, ownership, imaginative freedom, imaginative decision-making, oracy, opportunity	Increased personal and collective participation. Moving from sharing ideas and emotions individually to debating and deciding collectively (*active listening, oracy and communication*)
Displacement from reality	Expression, freedom, leaving the stress of real life (*worry, bad things, anger, sadness*)	Sharing emotion, being listened to, creating elsewhere	Acceptance, non- judgemental space, sharing, being listened to, creating somewhere else *where anything can happen*	Creative engagement leading to increased *emotional regulation and emotional literacy*
Positive feelings and wellbeing	Expressing, sharing feelings, having fun, being challenged and focused	Figuring things out together, facing uncertainty together	Story Worldbuilding structure and pedagogy	Increased confidence, self-efficacy leading to embracing unpredictability, shared social problem solving, and collective decision making (*possibility thinking and emotional resilience*)
Addressing conflict through negotiation	Struggling, working things out, coming to shared agreement	Embracing difficulty, utilising a range of active listening skills. valuing difference and also being yourself, negotiating	Time and curriculum space, teacher expertise	Increased confidence and competence to work through social dilemmas individually, applying a range of democratic strategies for active listening such as '*testing out everyone's ideas collectively. Valuing difference and speaking up for others.* Moving into *active citizenship*
Imaginative Freedom	Expressing, learning, imagining new things, creating	Critical thinking and reflection, resourcefulness, autonomy, confidence	Range of meaning making, diverse multi-modal literacies, imaginative space and time, different curriculum spaces, child to child learning	Engagement in imaginative story developed confidence in trying new things over time and becoming critical of narrow learning in other subjects,
Teamwork and belonging	Participation in non-judgmental space where there is no right and wrong	Valuing collective action and tolerance of all ideas, increased self-confidence. Making new friends	Range of story making pedagogical tools which focus on embodied and emotional learning Sense of connectedness and friendship	Increased participation and understanding of the importance of participation, leading to developing a range of autonomous and collective democratic skills and tolerance
Self-efficacy and confidence	Feeling worried about being right or wrong, using imagination in the wrong way, feeling worthless	Working things out together in new teams	Skilful facilitation of pedagogy by artist educator	Children were able to share emotions more freely in relation to issues both in their own lives outside school and solution find in story worlds. Greater cohesion, inclusion and social problem solving
Critical thinking	Trying new ways of learning and feeling	Thinking of better things through the imagination, solving problems and violence	Sustained curriculum time for and space Drama Worldbuilding	Increased ability to critically reflect, articulate, explain and act on these experiences

Table 2
Eight creativity and wellbeing dispositions and transferable competences.

Disposition (attitude, ethics, mindset)	Transferable Competencies	Skill	Curriculum Knowledge
1 Agency and openness 2 Displacement from reality as emotional regulation 3 Positivity, embracing risk, solution finding 4 Addressing conflict through negotiation 5 Imaginative freedom 6 Self-efficacy and confidence 7 Teamwork and belonging 8 Critical thinking, embodied learning	Oracy competence Social and emotional competence Active Citizenship competence Wellbeing competence Cultural awareness competence	debating, negotiating, inquiring active compassion, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, adaptability, collaboration, self-regulation, divergent thinking, autonomy, resilience, collective problem solving.	Arts and Humanities, Literacies. Citizenship

become more complex through the process of the Exploration and Discovery components. Children were seen to *grapple* with relationships inside and outside the fiction. I argue that Oracy, critical thinking and democratic action in this embodied way are key components of a wellbeing curriculum. We need to give children opportunities to practice and grapple with these relational skills and knowledges so that they become competent and confident communicators, and thinkers. Table 2 highlights the ways that the dispositions were integral to developing *transferable competencies and skills.*

Crucially, emotions and actions were expressed in these spaces rather than repressed and managed by adults enabling learner agency, cultivating a greater sense of active compassion and democratic thinking to emerge. Theoretically, then, the term critical hope is given contemporary empirical meaning in relation to drama pedagogy. *Criticality* is activated through the process of individual and collective story making because participants are challenged to rethink old ideas, confront biases and ask difficult questions. *Hopefulness* is activated because they are required to create new story responses to these challenges together. *Creative–critical thinking* underpins their collective actions because they witness the consequence of those actions together, replaying fictional moments to find alternative actions. Through this pedagogical experience, they engage with the unknown and actively *embrace possibility*.

4.3. Normalising struggle

In exploring the definition of creativity as being **'in a state of opening to the unknown, a place of possibilities, a place that a positive environment offers'** (Norris, 2012, p300), the dispositions highlight the changing affective states as children *become open to the unknown.* Through my choice of pedagogy, I held these spaces within curriculum. Critically, in relation to wellbeing, *struggle and openness* are seen as normative in these drama worlds by teachers and children, which encourages and supports new ways of thinking and being which may feel too risky in other situations. There is a sense of working in symbiosis as children are invited to practise creating a future world based on their negotiated viewpoints. This is always peppered with struggle, and I argue that working through these sites of classroom struggle *opens up* spaces of critical hope and mitigates naïve hope, which can often leave us feeling stuck and in despair when things do not go as we would like. Massumi's (2015) conception of 'hope' is conceived as *our openness* to these intensities, a focus on what we *can do* in any given moment. In that moment, there is always room to act or take alternative pathways. These are agentic moments driven by meta-affect. It is in these moments that we develop the stance required for inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015). This can be thought of as active pupil voice which can offer a way to start critically exploring our changing relationships with each other and the world.

4.4. Integrating wellbeing: meta-affect as powerful learning

Within this inquiry, I have specifically focused on the embodied and relational components of learning in drama because they are the areas that are often eroded in English education policy and hard to evidence. Building on Colvert's (2019) Framework of Immersive play, the research highlights five affective senses which emerged through the data reading, namely: *a sense of belonging, agency, investment, purpose and imaginative freedom.* Methodologically, this research offers new ways to articulate *how* affective meaning making is made. These affective states meant that learning was more purposeful, participatory, meaningful and memorable, creating safe spaces to *become open* to each other.

What emerges from this research is the ways in which children were able to competently articulate the ways in which this learning made them feel compared to other ways of learning. Mentions of '*flow' and 'different rules,' 'thinking of better things'* through the creative workshop processes' are amongst many of the data sets. This suggests an emerging understanding and articulation by some children of meta-cognition (the ways in which they think about their own learning) which is enabled and enhanced by meta-affective tools. These dimensions of learning are intrinsically related. Indeed, the teacher commented in an increased understanding and memory of historical facts related to topics such as the Mayans. Furthermore, studies show that meta-affective tools are critical in addressing areas such as race and racism in schools meaningfully, particularly when students need to 'stick with' uncomfortable feelings to develop

authentic compassion (Chick, 2009, Zembylas 2015) and solidarity.

In returning to the current crisis in mental health in schools and the need for 'iterative' approaches to positive mental wellbeing, the research argues that creative approaches such as Drama Worldbuilding should be integrated more widely to support emotional literacy and active citizenship. Furthermore, these creative–critical dispositions whilst emerging through a localised curriculum approach in one classroom, also align with global skills which children will need to become regenerative, diverse thinkers (ELT Global Skills, PISA 2018).

4.5. Conclusion: recognising the potential of creative pedagogy

Whilst education policy has barely evolved in the last 100 years, our world has changed unrecognisably. English schools, however, continue to be based on the same knowledge systems and most of the research continues to focus on improving existing educational practices (Biesta, 2014). Within my workshop visits in school, my time was often cut short, compromised and collapsed due to competing policy agendas.

This qualitative case study was limited by its small scale. Further research is warranted to apply the dispositions to wider contexts and creative pedagogies. The methodology, however, provides a heuristic approach useful to teachers interested enabling creativity and wellbeing, because it operates from a different set of pedagogical principles to those promoted through English educational policy. In reviewing standardised assessment as a barrier to creative learning (Durham Report on Creativity, 2019) the notion of *recognising* creativity rather than trying to assess and measure it is key. The Eight Affective Dispositions of Wellbeing and Creativity makes an original contribution to supporting teacher *recognition and understanding* of creative pedagogies, in line with methodological gaps in empirical evidence on creative learning (Cremin et al., 2019).

Crucially, the data suggests that these dispositions are malleable (Shum and Crick, 2012) and drive transferable competencies, skills and knowledge. Within these workshop spaces, drama pedagogy was seen to *open up* important sites for actively listening to the voices, feelings and concerns of children through collective creativity. They also act as affirmative, or critical 'assessment' spaces, in which to evaluate our teaching practices if we are to take pupil voice seriously. This indicates that empirical research concerning teachers and their pupils should play a more pivotal role in shaping curriculum policy through contemporary practice. The research highlights the importance of enabling children's potential as social agents, responsible choosers (Baraldi, 2014) and change makers. This is ultimately linked to their wellbeing. Moreover, these findings have clear implications for recognition of meta-affect and collective creativity as important drivers of learning when considering *how* to implement policies such as OECD Learning Compass 2030.

Viewing education as a set of complex relationships between school, assessment, and policy (Bernstein, 1971) is seen as a helpful way to think about what needs to be put in place if this relationship is potentially to be disrupted (Whitty, 2010). As educators, our pedagogical choices can give professional agency and opportunities for rewilding curriculum. Much wider implementation and further case studies of creative arts pedagogies is needed through professional communities of practice and policy to make sustained curriculum changes, such as those seen emerging in Wales. This also has implications for teacher training and professional development. Much like our relationship with our planet, we need to repair the damage done to young people's wellbeing and sense of agency by actively engaging with complex relational pedagogies which are consistent with living well.

> "Critical Hope is about developing the individual and collective spirit to imagine possible futures and foster the energy to continually create transformative spaces of action in order that they may be realised " (Danvers, 2014, p1239).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

This paper is part of the PhD of the author. The author certifies that she is sole author and has participated in the work, taking public responsibility for the content, including participation in the concept, design, analysis, writing, or revision of the manuscript. Furthermore, the author certifies that this material or similar material has not been and will not be submitted to or published in any other publication before its appearance in the Creativity and Thinking Skills.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A

Interview questions for children:

1 What does drama mean to you?
2 What do you like about drama?
3 What do you not like about drama?
4 What do you think you are learning in drama?
5 How does drama make you feel?
6 Do you think you should do more or less drama in school? Why?

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