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A pedagogy of professional noticing and co-inquiry: embedding drama for oracy across the primary curriculum.

Dr Lisa Stephenson & Professor Rachel Lofthouse

ABSTRACT

This case study shares analysis of the first year of a teacher development funded project across 8 schools in Bradford which focuses on using drama for Oracy. The research highlights the ways that the pedagogy was co-created between teacher, artist and coach through an emerging model of professional practice. Central to this was 'holding spaces' for teachers to co-plan, co-teach and co-reflect together a co-inquiry based approach to coaching and mentoring. Teachers and artists collectively drew from a pedagogy of noticing significant moments within the learning. The case study highlights their observations of the impact of creative pedagogy on their own professional development and children's learning. The model of CPD offers important insights about empowering schools to make sustainable curriculum changes together through action research. It also offers new research insights into the pedagogical relationship between drama, oracy and wellbeing.

A pedagogy of professional noticing and co-inquiry: embedding drama, storytelling, and oracy across the primary curriculum.

Oral language skills underpin children's educational success and enhance positive cognitive, social, emotional and life outcomes. However, significant numbers of children struggle to develop competence in speaking and listening, especially children from areas of high economic deprivation (Dobinson & Dockrell, 2021). This is highlighted by the Oracy All Parliamentary Policy Group (APPG) whose reports are advocating a renewed focus on Oracy (2020).

This case study shares the emerging findings from year one of a two-year project, funded by the Paul Hamlyn, Teacher Development Fund. We are utilising drama pedagogy to bring the curriculum to life through storytelling, with an explicit focus on children's oracy. The project is co-led by research and practice experts in drama pedagogy (Stephenson, 2022,) from the Story Makers Company, Leeds Beckett University and school leaders from Bowling Park Primary. The eight partner schools are in the Bradford BD5 school's network, who share an ambition to embed an integrated story approach to curriculum. Our focus is on embedding drama pedagogy within the humanities subjects, creating an imaginative story curriculum experience within Year 3 and 4, across the schools. As part of this knowledge exchange, teachers are paired with one of five artist educators (specialists in drama pedagogy) and given time and space to *co-plan, co-deliver and co-reflect* for 15 sessions across each year. Central to this process of professional development and learning (CPDL) is a coaching approach (Lofthouse, 2020) blended with expert pedagogical modelling and learning exchange. This article explores the ways that our co-inquiry approach to CPDL was integral to supporting more sustainable pedagogical changes in the localised contexts of the schools involved.

Educational Landscape: context and ambition

The eight partnership schools are situated in an economically deprived area of inner-city Bradford. Their 3800 children come from an almost uniquely diverse range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The schools have very strong ties to the local community and were keen bring this experience to the project, ensuring that it remained culturally relevant to their children's lived experiences. Many of the children start in Early Years with social and language skills well below national expectations and a large majority of pupils speak English as an additional language. Additionally, a significant minority are 'New to English' from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and often Gypsy or Roma backgrounds. Furthermore, the schools noted a significant impact on learner's oracy and communications skills following Covid-19. They were not alone; the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Oracy (APPG) reported that school closures had a detrimental effect on spoken language of their most disadvantaged pupils.

"It is essential for the schools within the community to embed their curriculum around Oracy and language development. Without this, our children are often unable to make the meaningful connections required to progress academically and develop critical interpersonal and communication skills made much more complex by COVID-19."

Senior Leader, Bowling Park Primary

Embedding Oracy: Why drama pedagogy?

Initially the senior leaders across the schools discussed the need for a '*collaborative brave space*' to make new informed, pedagogical choices through engagement in creative pedagogies which would impact on pupils' social mobility (Cultural Alliance, 2019). It is worth noting that the lead school and researchers had worked together previously and so there was confidence in the drama pedagogy through this partnership (Stephenson and Dobson, 2020). However, the term 'brave space' also recognises that our pedagogical approach initially 'felt risky' to most other teachers, artists, SLT because they were unsure about how it would integrate with curriculum requirements. Our model of CPDL was therefore critical in empowering teachers to activate curriculum content from a different pedagogical starting point.

Drama, expressive arts and story have a unique way of activating emotion and action. The project uses drama pedagogy, not 'teaching drama'. In drama pedagogy or Drama Worldbuilding (Stephenson, 2022) children co-create stories, with elements of active social problem solving alongside teachers and artists. Within these fictional contexts, they are challenged to work collectively, coming up with ideas which draw from their diverse perspectives. A topic about the Maya can become a story about friendship or competing values as well as covering historical content. This means that they are actively applying curriculum content, such as geographical or history topics, using a range of inquiry and communication skills which foreground oracy and relationships. For some children such as Roma children, storytelling draws from their cultural literacy practices more than writing and text. The pedagogy involves making meaning through linguistic, visual, audio and spatial modes of communication- effective for EAL learners and has been shown to improve spontaneity, fluency, articulation, vocabulary and the use of diverse language registers (O'Toole, J. and Stinson, M., 2013). However, like most creative pedagogies it can be difficult to 'evidence', research informed expertise in the pedagogy was therefore, also critical to embedding high quality learning.

Professional development as a pedagogy of noticing through co-inquiry.

The rhythm, or consistency, of the CPDL model has been key in *holding space* for *co-creation*, *co-planning* and *co-reflection* and driving the project. This action research cycle has provided *sustained time and space* for teachers and artists to take professional ownership, embedding practices at their own pace, in a non-judgmental community of practice. Each term begins and ends with professional practice days, where pedagogy is modelled and shared across schools. This process is underpinned by three main inquiry questions,

Why does this pedagogical approach matter to us and our children?

How does drama/creative pedagogy work in our classrooms/schools/curriculum?

What is the impact of this pedagogy on teaching and learning?

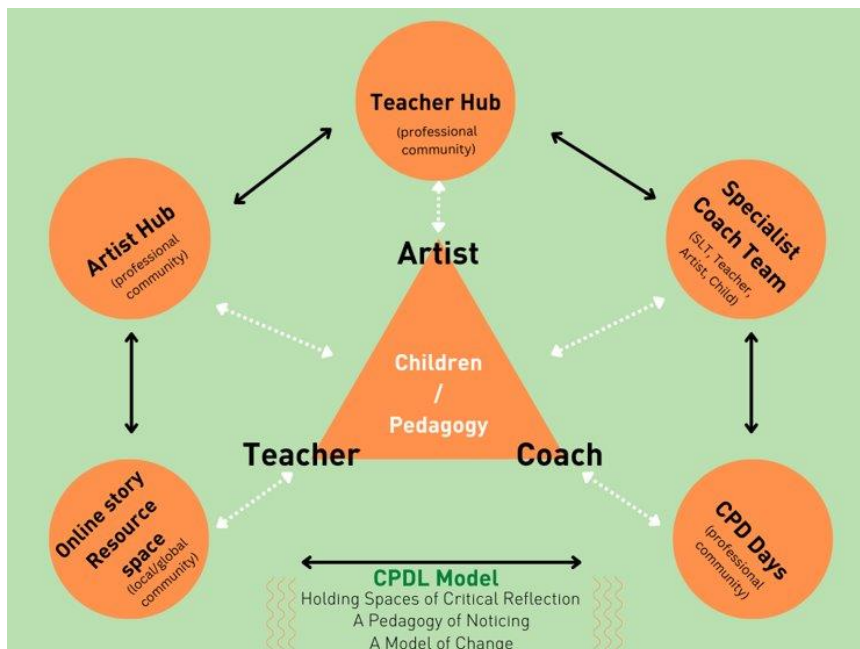
Our process is outlined through six principles of co-inquiry across the year.

1. *Establishing* a shared set of pedagogical values
2. *Creating* a shared language which draws from empirical research.

3. *Experiencing* the pedagogy in action as participants.
4. *Co-reflecting, co-planning* in response to shared practice.
5. *Sharing* localised approaches to *embedding* learning.
6. *Co-researching* to build practice-based research in response to emerging challenges

Following each co-taught session in school, artist, teacher and coach also have a three way online reflective conversation, adding a further immediate space to critically reflect. The five coaches have a range of professional experiences as SLT, teachers, artists and the coaching providing diverse perspectives. Termly online coach meetings are used to feedback across schools providing a strong feedforward loop from which to address tensions and needs within the project on CPD days. This ensures responsivity across the partnership. Our model of CPDL is outlined in image 1, below. We view this integrated coaching partnership as *relational and dialogic* (Lofthouse, 2019), meaning that professional practice is co-created through sustained co-inquiry.

Image 1: A pedagogy of noticing through co-inquiry



Within the project, we have drawn from a **pedagogy of professional noticing** as a form of critical reflection on learning. Within all coaching and professional development sessions across the project, we asked teachers and artists to co-reflect on the *significant moments* which they noticed within sessions. Rooney and Boud (2019), note that professional noticing is essential for developing professional practice. It is an intentional activity which is embedded in both observing professional practice and those performing professional practice, providing shared

dialogue and meaning making across the project. This is categorized by *noticing in context*, *noticing of significance* and *noticing learning itself*.

Emerging Findings

Over the course of the project, we are learning together with the teachers and artists through their experiences of noticing. At the midpoint of the project, we interviewed 20 teachers and 5 artists across all schools. Each school pairing was invited to critically reflect on the project so far through the following questions, also used a coaching prompt:

*What is a **significant moment** that stands out for you so far in the project?*

*What did you notice about **how the drama worked** in pursuit of the learning?*

*What did you notice about **pupil engagement** in the session?*

*How did the pupils **make meaning** during the session?*

*How was **Oracy** activated by the drama?*

*Is there anything new that **you noticed** about your practice within the session?*

What would you like to take forward and build on in the next session?

Differing teacher responses have been thematically analysed below and indicate that teachers are noticing learning in new ways in relation to their own professional development and most notably the impact on pupils.

“As teachers, you're able to recognise the opportunities that are being created for children who come into the class with different needs, different attitudes, different capacity, different typical habits etc. You're creating some alternative spaces, some different ways in which they can engage.”

Time and space for reimagining pedagogical approaches

Teachers initially reflected on the importance of professional trust in trying new pedagogies. This initially involved relinquishing a sense of power and control and having time for observation.

“It's a different approach to teaching. I think if I was in the classroom I might not have let go of the control as easily as I did in the different space that we were using.”

“I think with the teacher head-on it was quite tricky trying to make that decision, because as a teacher you plan your lessons, and you know how you want the lessons to sort of go and what you want out of the children.”

Meaningful pupil investment

Many of the teachers' reflections involved noticing pupil investment in new ways. This gave confidence to further embedding the pedagogy. Investment was related to increased confidence in expression, active engagement in sessions and stronger friendships.

“It was quite difficult at the start, but then I thought yes this is going to work because they were just so enthusiastic and all they kept talking about is that's my building. They're

coming up with words like the walls will never melt, it's got steel and yes, they were just so invested in it and then some of them went home to research, didn't they?"

Pupil investment was also linked to extending learning from home to school and a greater sense of inquiry and exploratory questioning from children.

"He doesn't engage at play time with anybody. He doesn't interact socially. After we'd done the wise man and he'd got a bit of confidence to speak out he was actually interacting at play time and playing games with the other children. He found his voice in the session but then carried it on further in the rest of his school life."

Challenging impact on pupil learning

Teachers often recounted aspects of learning which surprised them. This often related to the impact on learning such as use of higher order vocabulary within story worlds, social and emotional engagement, use of a range of language registers and nonverbal communication, which challenged their perceptions of what they felt some children were capable of.

"Yes, I think it allows opportunities for children who perhaps like you say struggle in the classroom setting, to be celebrated and to be successful. I think it also gives us as teachers a bit more headspace and time to look at that in a different context where you're not so wrapped up in worrying about leading lessons and the complications that comes with that. You're able to observe children in a different way."

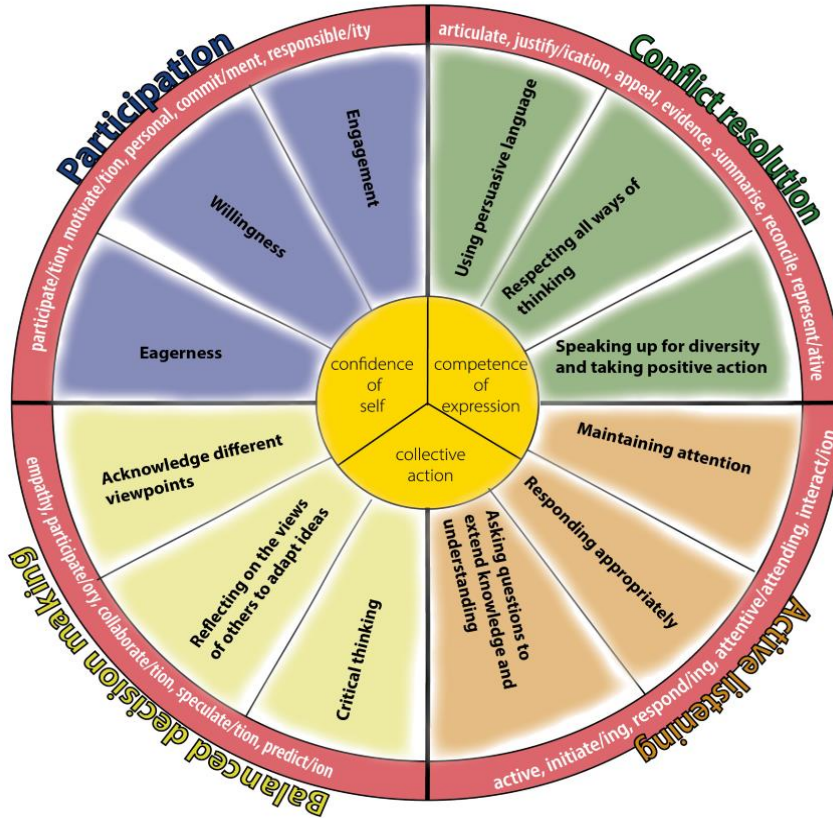
Notably, **teachers observed that children** linked the story worlds to their lived their experience, and that many of their questions were related to social justice and that the fictional world drew parallels with lived experience- this fueled meaningful dialogic inquiry and agentic learning.

"No. I'd say for me it was quite unique and I think the way that they actually pictured the conflict itself and talked about it being heavy was something I hadn't anticipated that they would be thinking like that."

Discussion: Empowering teachers through dialogic co-inquiry

In relation to oracy, drama pedagogy is seen to create a 'dialogic space' (Alexander, 2005) where communication in the classroom is collective (teachers and children in partnership) rather than teacher dominated. It is 'reciprocal' (talking, listening and sharing viewpoints), supportive (no fear of failure), cumulative (builds on each other's ideas) and purposeful (with educational goals in view). Our CPDL model was underpinned by these principles.

As we continue the project, a new model of the social and emotional aspects of oracy has been developed based on teachers' observations of children's learning. ***This focusses on conflict resolution and wellbeing competencies.*** Currently, this empirical research is being piloted across all schools and developed further as a formative assessment which aims to support teachers and policy makers nationally and internationally and feed into the Oracy APPG work. It will be shared through our project website.



Social and Emotional Components of Oracy

(Stephenson, Patel, and Crowther 2023)

Whilst this complex project has cost and time implications, its success has relied on sustained investment, commitment and responsive actions from all involved- including SLT. Crucially, these insights have emerged from *holding spaces for professional noticing* over the first year and are underpinned by empirical research. *We were all able to shift our practices through a process of co-inquiry*. More widely, the project highlights the potential of developing meaningful partnerships between schools and universities in order to **empower** teachers and schools to develop responsive pedagogies to the needs of their learners.

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