

Permeating the curriculum through collective creativity, social-emotional learning and ethical action through children's voices

Original Research

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Introduction

While OECD analyses confirm that competencies such as collaboration, empathy and responsibility can be effectively taught (OECD, 2024), comparative data reveals that pupils in England demonstrate weaker socio-emotional skills than peers in 30 other countries (Lucas et al., 2025). Social-emotional learning is most effective when embedded schoolwide and across the curriculum; however, the pressure to raise attainment often limits consistent, evidence-based practice. While social-emotional competencies are essential for ethical action, the dimensions of ethical learning remain underexplored in both research and educational practice (Burroughs and Barkauskas, 2017). How can teachers cultivate social-emotional learning and ethical action within their curriculum, given these constraints and a lack of empirical evidence?

This paper builds on extensive longitudinal, robust empirical research evidencing children's social-emotional experiences of learning through creative pedagogy, addressing the lack of learner-perspective research in studies of creative pedagogy (Cremin and Chappell, 2019). Children's experiences across 18 primary schools are evidenced through a model of 'Eight Dispositions for Collective Creativity and Ethical Action' (Stephenson, 2023, 2025). This paper advances the eight dispositions model theoretically and demonstrates its added value through systematic comparison with established frameworks of social-emotional learning and creative mindsets.

Social-emotional learning: Gaps between educational policy and practice

The OECD's vision for 'Education for human flourishing' (OECD, 2025, p.25) positions the competence of 'acting in the world' as central to future-ready education, defining it as the ability to find purpose, identify intent and undertake meaningful action. To achieve this, learners must develop adaptive problem-solving and ethical competence, skills that depend on advanced social-emotional literacy, including negotiation, active listening and perspective-taking. This emphasis is echoed in the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review (DfE, 2025), which introduces a revitalised curriculum, prioritising social-emotional learning and mandating democracy and citizenship education by 2028. These reforms signal a recognition that such competencies are inherently collaborative and relational.

However, a significant gap persists between policy aspirations and classroom learning. Empirical research consistently highlights insufficient attention to social-emotional learning and ethical education, emphasising the need for systemic, school-wide approaches (Burroughs and Barkauskas, 2017; Steponavičius et al., 2023). The OECD Social and Emotional Skills Survey (2024) identifies global challenges in embedding these skills and stresses the importance of equipping teachers with contemporary pedagogical strategies.

Children’s voices on creative pedagogies

Global literature indicates that children and young people often feel that their perspectives are marginalised in education, reinforcing calls for greater learner agency and curriculum co-design (Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2017; Brody, 2022). Creativity is widely positioned as a core educational priority, yet dominant research continues to privilege individualised, cognitive accounts of creative capacity. Such approaches marginalise children’s voices and under-theorise the social, relational and ethical dimensions of creative learning.

Empirical background

Eight Dispositions for Collective Creativity and Ethical Action

This paper builds on an established empirical evidence base examining children’s experiences of ‘drama worldbuilding’, a collective, inquiry-led creative pedagogy embedded within primary humanities curricula through systematic action research with teachers (Stephenson, 2023). Drama worldbuilding involves children creating and exploring a shared fictional world, taking on roles to respond to problems and perspectives. Learning happens through reflection on emotion-in-action and is structured in three phases: invitation, exploration and discovery. These are outlined in **Table 1**, alongside an example of pedagogical practice.

Table 1: The three phases in drama worldbuilding

Drama Worldbuilding phase	Enquiry questions	Example of pedagogical tools	Example of practice
INVITATION	Where are we? Who are we?	Drama mapping, role-on-the wall, teacher-in-role	Students co-create a coastal town facing rising sea levels using drama mapping techniques. In role, they share feelings (fear, hope) as the teacher introduces the threat, building emotional connection through dialogue.
EXPLORATION	What is possible in this situation? Who has power? Is this fair? What is	Role-play, playback theatre, freeze-frames teacher-in-role, writing-in-role	In a town meeting, children meet different characters (e.g. politician, displaced family, business leader, activist) and debate: relocate or defend? They respond (‘I

	our responsibility?		feel worried because...’/’Is this fair?’) and face a dilemma (whether to accept funding from a polluting company), exploring tension and responsibility.
DISCOVERY	What would we change? What have we learned?	Reflective dialogue, thought journals	Out of role, students collectively reflect: When did you feel most affected? What felt unfair? Did your thinking change? They use this to agree on an ethical action.

Drama worldbuilding example of pedagogical structure

The underlying dataset spans 19 primary schools across Leeds, Bradford and Doncaster, involving approximately 4,000 children aged seven to 10 over five years. Across these projects, children engaged in the collaborative construction of fictional worlds, enacting creativity as a socially situated practice through shared imagination, democratic participation and ethical problem-solving. Data was generated through pupil focus group conversations and longitudinal case studies (Goddard, 2025; Stephenson and Patel, 2025). Systematic thematic analysis across the projects identified eight recurring dispositions, articulated by children as values, attitudes and mindsets emerging from sustained collective creative work. These findings, reported elsewhere (Stephenson, 2025), demonstrate creativity as not only a cognitive process but also an emotional, relational and ethical practice.

Theorising collective creativity, pedagogy and social-emotional learning

Rather than focusing on self-regulation, we have chosen to theorise the social-emotional and embodied components of creative pedagogy through the concept of co-regulation (Hadwin et al., 2017). Co-regulation is defined as the dynamic processes through which people support or hinder each other’s ability to regulate their thinking, behaviour, motivation and emotions, and it is evident across the datasets and dispositions. Alongside this, meta-affect (Stephenson, 2023) describes the awareness and understanding of one’s own emotional responses and those of others, and how these emotions influence thinking and action.

Methodology

The contribution of the present paper is not empirical replication but theoretical advancement. It develops the Eight Dispositions for Collective Creativity and Ethical Action (Eight Dispositions; see **Figure 1**) as a conceptual framework and systematically maps these

empirically derived dispositions against established models of creativity and social-emotional learning. In doing so, the paper advances a child-centred reconceptualisation of creative learning and foregrounds the theoretical significance of children's voices in contemporary creativity research.



Figure 1: Eight Dispositions for Collective Creativity and Ethical Action (Stephenson, 2025). Reproduced from Stephenson (2025), Thinking Skills and Creativity, CC BY 4.0.

The potential of the Eight Dispositions as a social-emotional and creative learning framework is further explored by comparing them to other theories and frameworks, to assess:

1. creativity
2. wellbeing theories and assessment in social-emotional learning.

1. Comparative mapping of the Eight Dispositions and the Creative Habits of Mind (CHoM) framework

The Creative Habits (of Mind) framework (Lucas et al., 2013) has been instrumental in supporting school leaders in developing the creativity of pupils and staff through a shared language. Since its conception, the authors have noted that *cognition is 'embodied'* and have adapted the title to the Creative Habits, used across national projects such as Creative Collaboratives. **Table 2** maps where the concepts align or differ, with pink shading showing where the five Creative Habits correspond to, extend or do not match the Eight Dispositions.

Table 2: Comparison between Eight Dispositions and CHoM

Five Creative Habits of Mind (CHoM)	Eight Dispositions for Collective Creativity, Social-Emotional Wellbeing and Ethical Action	Key difference
1. Inquisitive exploring, questioning, challenging assumptions	Agency and openness	Child data merges curiosity with agency, identity and relational openness, not just cognitive inquiry.
2. Imaginative playing with possibilities, making connections	Possibility thinking	Overlap, but the child-derived version includes cultural learning, identity and social imagination.
3. Persistent sticking with difficulty, resilience	Self-efficacy and confidence	Child data situates persistence within confidence, emotional safety and identity growth.
4. Collaborative working well with others	Teamwork and belonging	Children emphasise belonging, <u>inclusion</u> and emotional connection, not just teamwork.
5. Disciplined developing skills, refining techniques	Embodied learning and critical reflection	Children view discipline as felt, embodied and experiential – not only skill refinement.

	Emotional enquiry	No emotional literacy; no reference to wellbeing or affect.
	Negotiation and ethical dialogue	Collaboration exists, but not ethical reasoning or conflict resolution.
	Imaginative freedom	Imagination is included, but not freedom, identity, expression or psychological conditions that enable imagination.
	Embodied learning and critical reflection	Does not address the physical, sensory or embodied nature of creativity, nor experiential/real-world action.

Mapping diagram 1: Five Creative Habits vs. Eight Dispositions

The analysis shows that the two frameworks *are complementary rather than competing*. The Eight Dispositions framework expands the Five Creative Habits framework beyond individual creative thinking to encompass collective, embodied and ethical modes of creative being. If Five Creative Habits offers a map of creative thinking, then the shared Eight Dispositions provides a map of the wider creative ecology – one that integrates emotion, identity, connection, inclusion and ethics as core components of creativity rather than optional additions. This bridges the gap in understanding between social-emotional learning and creative learning through children’s experiences of learning – amplifying their voices and developing an empirical understanding of *how creative pedagogies are experienced*. This is arguably an important mode of formative assessment.

2. Comparison between the Eight Dispositions framework and models of social-emotional learning and wellbeing in schools

In our second mapping, we compare well-established theories and models of social and emotional learning and wellbeing with the Eight Dispositions, highlighting conceptual alignments and differences (**Table 3**).

Table 3: Comparison between Eight Dispositions and models of social-emotional learning and wellbeing

Eight Dispositions and definition	PERMA theory	Self-Determination Theory	CASEL theory	PSED	Psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989)
1. Agency, autonomy and openness	Engagement	Autonomy Competence Relatedness	Self-management	Supporting self-care	Autonomy
2. Self-efficacy and confidence	Accomplishment Engagement	Autonomy Competence Relatedness	Self-management	Teaching and modelling Managing emotions and feelings	Environmental mastery Self-acceptance
3. Teamwork and belonging	Relationships Meaning	Competence Relatedness	Social awareness Relationship skills	Promoting positive relationships	Positive relations
4. Emotional enquiry	Positive emotion	Autonomy Competence Relatedness	Self-awareness	Teaching and modelling Managing emotions and feelings Supporting self-care	Self-acceptance
5. Addressing struggle and conflict Collective problem-solving	Relationships Accomplishment	Competence Autonomy Relatedness	Self-awareness Social awareness Relationship skills Responsible decision-making	Promoting positive relationships	Positive relations
6. Possibility thinking					Personal growth
7. Imaginative freedom					Personal growth
8. Embodied learning and critical thinking					Environmental mastery
Conceptual relationship and key difference	It could be argued that the more cerebral skills of possibility thinking, imaginative	There is no direct reference to three elements: possibility thinking, imaginative freedom and embodied learning/critical thinking.	There is no direct reference to three elements: possibility thinking,	Possibility thinking and imaginative freedom are not evident in	While elements of possibility thinking and imaginative

	freedom and embodied learning/critical thinking are not represented in this model of wellbeing.		Imaginative freedom and embodied learning/critical thinking. This may be because the SEL framework looks at self and other awareness rather than having a focus on cognitive skills.	this model, as idea generation is not focused upon as part of the framework.	freedom are evident in Ryff’s personal growth element, these are not an exact mapping, as personal growth is essentially a eudaimonic conception (i.e. self-actualisation). Environmental mastery does involve acting through mental and physical activities but does not fully encompass embodied learning and critical thinking
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Key and supplementary notes: <i>Ryff’s Psychological Well-Being Model (1989) conceptualises wellbeing across six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose, and personal growth, and remains primarily validated for adult populations.</i> <i>PERMA Theory (Seligman, 2011) identifies five wellbeing elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment – also developed with adults in mind.</i> <i>The CASEL SEL Framework (2023) defines five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, and promotes their use across school and community contexts</i> <i>The EEF Personal Social Emotional Development Guidance (EEF, 2023) emphasises emotional regulation, positive relationships, and self-care in the Early Years, supporting social and emotional development, particularly for disadvantaged children.</i> <i>Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2012): a wellbeing theory consisting of three areas: 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; connected to communities; wanting to be cared for).</i>

Mapping Diagram 2: Social-emotional learning and wellbeing vs. Eight

Dispositions

Through this mapping, *possibility thinking, embodied learning, imaginative freedom and critical thinking* are highlighted as gaps in the theories of wellbeing and assessments of social-emotional learning. These dispositions are unique features of creative pedagogies, particularly activated collectively through Drama Worldbuilding. Arguably, these collective, creative dispositions were pivotal in enabling purposeful and challenging pedagogical conditions that supported children’s complex social-emotional and ethical meaning-making.

Conclusion: Permeating the curriculum through Eight Dispositions for Collective Creativity – a framework for social-emotional wellbeing

Cultivating ethical competence and social-emotional literacy is foundational for enabling purposeful action, and requires moving beyond policy rhetoric towards relational, evidence-based pedagogy. Rooted in authentic data, the Eight Dispositions framework offers a holistic, empirically grounded model for understanding young people's creative and ethical development through creative pedagogies. In practice, teachers are using the dispositions to evidence and assess the impact of pedagogy on children's social-emotional learning and to align social-emotion learning and wellbeing with school values and the PSHE curriculum. While the dispositions derive from a single pedagogical approach, the research offers a theoretically significant account of *how* creative pedagogies activate learning through collective reflection, extending models of creative learning to include social, emotional, embodied and ethical dimensions.

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