

Activating children's social-emotional learning through story-making: A collaborative approach in primary classrooms

Original Research

Written by: Lisa Stephenson, Beryce Nixon, Rachel Hodgson and Rebecca Austwick

From this issue:



[Issue 27: Innovative and creative pedagogy](#)

Author affiliations:

DR LISA STEPHENSON, LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY, UK

BERYCE NIXON OBE, CEO, EXCEED LEARNING PARTNERSHIP, UK

RACHEL HODGSON, HEAD OF RESEARCH AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, EXCEED LEARNING PARTNERSHIP, UK

REBECCA AUSTWICK, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INCLUSION, EXCEED LEARNING PARTNERSHIP, UK

Example citation: Stephenson L et al. (2026) Activating children's social-emotional learning through story-making: A collaborative approach in primary classrooms. *Impact* 27. Available at: https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/activating-childrens-social-emotional-learning-through-story-making-a-collaborative-approach-in-primary-classrooms

Introduction

National and international guidance (OECD, 2019; DfE, 2025) highlights the importance of helping pupils to work collaboratively with others, listen actively, consider different perspectives and act responsibly. This article explores how story-based drama can be embedded within everyday teaching to support pupils' social-emotional learning through collaborative, creative approaches. Drawing on a trust-wide action research project across eight primary schools over three years, we examine *how* embedding drama and storytelling pedagogy across the curriculum enabled pupils to engage with complex social situations, develop empathy and make decisions together.

In England, while relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) became statutory in 2020, broader personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education remains non-statutory and is often marginalised within crowded curricula, frequently taught for less than one hour per week (Gedikoglu, 2021). However, recent policy developments, including updated statutory guidance for RSHE to be implemented from September 2026 and wider curriculum reform priorities, signal increasing recognition of the importance of wellbeing, relational learning and life skills. These developments create a critical opportunity for pedagogical approaches that embed social-emotional learning meaningfully within the curriculum, rather than treating it as peripheral.

Within this context, we explore the impact of creative pedagogies in enabling pupils to engage with complexity, develop empathy and rehearse real-world decision-making through collaborative and imaginative processes. Social-emotional competencies are necessary for ethical actions, such as being honest or showing respect for others, yet the dimensions of ethical learning remain underexplored in research and practice (Burroughs and Barkauskas, 2017). There remains limited research into creative pedagogies and their role in helping young people to navigate uncertainty and expand teachers' pedagogical repertoires (Cremin and Chappell, 2021). In classroom practice, this includes how pupils recognise, reflect on and respond to their own and others' emotional experiences when making decisions. This can be described as meta-affect (DeBellis and Goldin, 2006; Stephenson, 2023).

Funded by the Laurel Trust, our project embedded drama, story and inquiry-based pedagogy across the humanities curriculum to improve pupils' social-emotional learning. Our project focused on collaborative rather than individualised learning, explicitly cultivating ethical action through creative pedagogy, and creating opportunities for meta-affective reflection, ethical reasoning and decision-making across the humanities curriculum. Our research question was:

What difference does a story-based/drama-based pedagogical approach to the curriculum have on Year 4 pupils' social and emotional development?

Drawing on transformational creativity (Sternberg, 2021) and possibility thinking (Craft, 2015), we viewed creative learning as a collaborative, imaginative and ethical process that enables pupils to engage with complexity and make decisions in shared contexts.

Action research approach

Employing collaborative action research (Messiou, 2019), our project involved eight primary schools within Exceed Learning Partnership – a multi-academy trust in Doncaster – and five artist educators and researchers (specialists in drama, creative writing and theatre) from Story Makers at Leeds Beckett University. Over 40 per cent of 3,000 primary-aged children in the trust are classified as disadvantaged, significantly above the national average of 22.5 per cent. In our first year, the project focused on over 300 Year 4 pupils across 13 classes. This group included 37 per cent eligible for pupil premium, 16 per cent with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and 18 per cent with English as an additional language (EAL).

Each academy assigned a senior leader to act as a coach, providing guidance and maintaining the project's prominence within their school. This sustained collaboration gave teachers time to trial new approaches, reflect on practice and adapt pedagogy within their own classrooms. Professional learning days brought all teachers together at the beginning and end of each term to share practices and deepen inquiry across schools. In our second and third years, these teachers became story experts, leading the embedding of drama worldbuilding across all trust schools with all teachers. This action research cycle provided *sustained time and space* for teachers to take professional ownership, embedding and adapting value-led practices at their own pace in a non-judgemental community. Central to the implementation of our project was consistent buy-in from senior leaders across the trust, led by the CEO (chief executive officer) and research lead.

Pedagogical approach

Drama worldbuilding (Stephenson, 2021) is a pedagogical approach to *collective problem-solving* through drama-based learning (embodied action), story-making and narrative co-inquiry, which framed our project, providing a shared language and approach. The approach extends established drama pedagogies (Heathcote and Bolton, 1984; Roberts and Kidd, 2018) through a 'pedagogical structure' and dispositions evidenced through children's voices (Stephenson, 2021). The 'pedagogical structure' moves through three phases of dialogic inquiry: an invitation phase, an exploration phase and a discovery phase, used for co-planning across the project (see **Figure 1**).

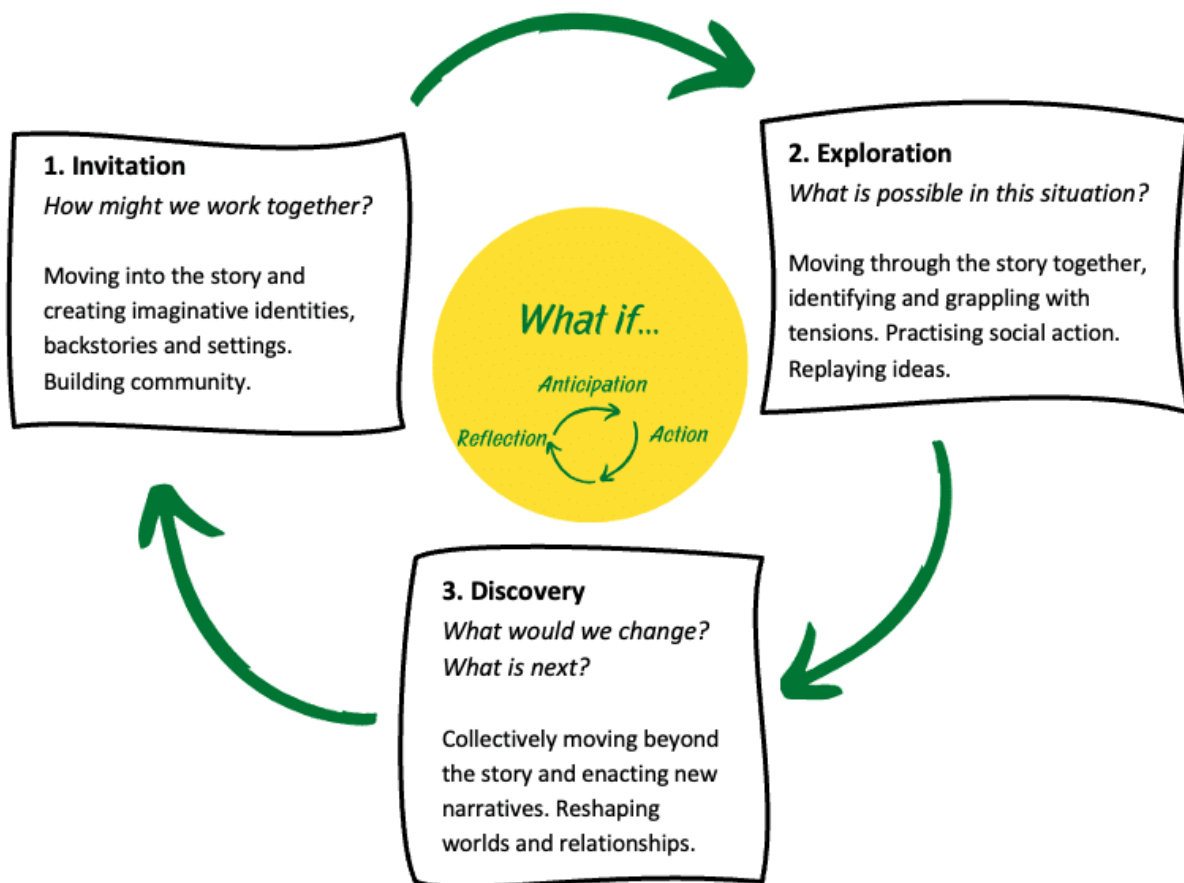


Figure 1: Drama worldbuilding pedagogy (Stephenson, 2021, 2023, 2025)

Children work collectively to solve fictional social problems, positioning them as agentic problem-solvers, following an anticipation-action-reflection cycle (OECD, 2019), activating critical thinking. Curriculum was co-planned with artist educators using inquiry questions. For example, Roman content was framed through questions such as 'What do ancient discoveries reveal about how different communities lived, clashed and shaped the world we know?'. Drama techniques, described by teachers as 'pedagogical tools', supported exploration through experiential lessons.

Each worldbuilding phase activates dialogic inquiry, as children navigate backstories and co-construct solutions within story worlds. Openness is 'rehearsed', as learners make collective decisions by asking 'What if?' and 'What is possible in this situation?'. Learners respond through multiple modes of communication, including visual, aural, physical expression and free writing. The approach uses dialogic language to support exploration and negotiation of diverse perspectives.

There are high expectations to listen, feel, think and act ethically together within the story worlds. This pedagogical approach has evidenced longitudinal impact through children's reflections, articulated as 'eight collective creativity and wellbeing dispositions' (Stephenson, 2023). These dispositions, understood as attitudes and values shaped by ethical framings, support learners in making ethically responsive decisions (**Figure 2**).

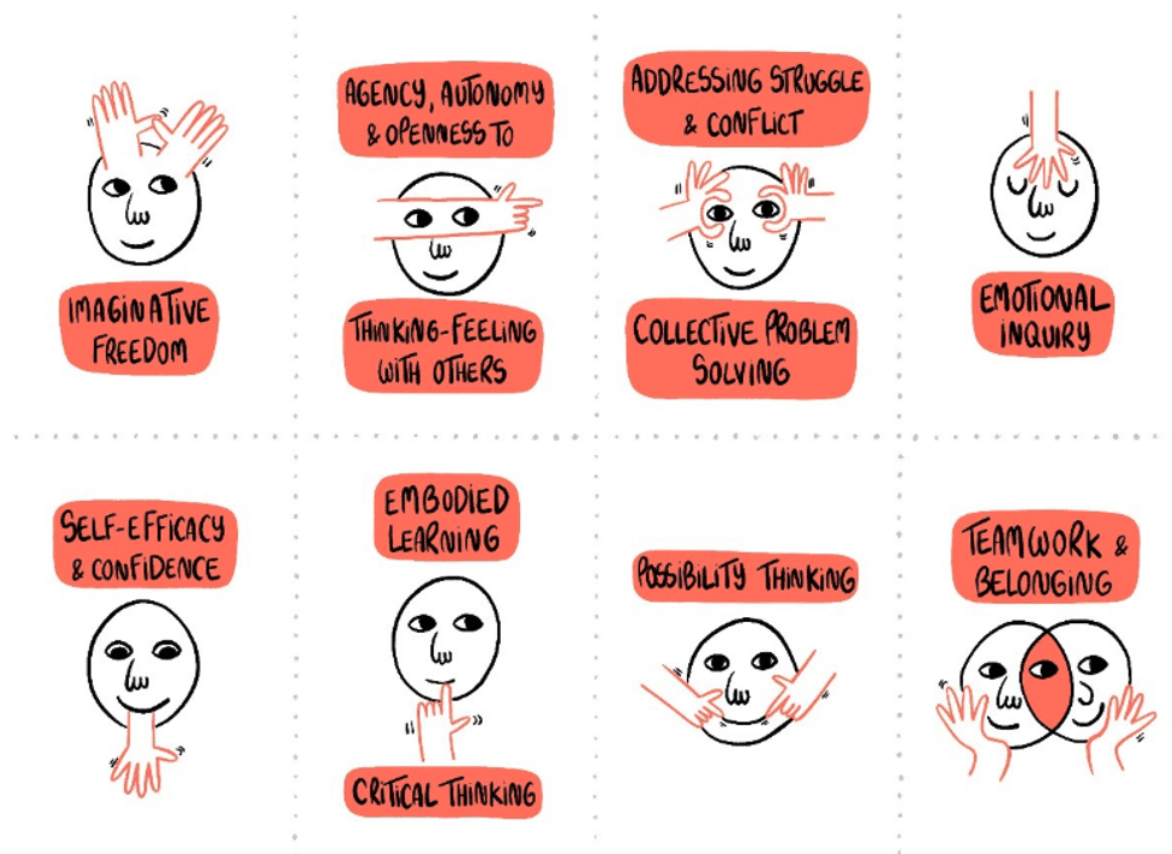


Figure 2: Eight Dispositions for Collective Creativity, Social-Emotional Wellbeing and Ethical Action (Stephenson, 2023)

Methods

The project utilised both qualitative and quantitative methods, outlined in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Methods used in the project

Participants and context (2023–26)	Data sample and methods
Doncaster, eight primary schools: 280 pupils aged eight/nine years and 36 teachers in the first year, 3,000 children in year two and 1,500 children directly in year three	13 pupil focus group conversations with 56 children, aged eight/nine years, across eight schools after 12 months of the project 36 pupil case studies in year one 96 pupil case studies in year two

Thematic analysis was used across all datasets. This study shares year one findings. Co-reflection was crucial, and **Figure 3** highlights the trust’s iterative approach to the analysis of pedagogical features.

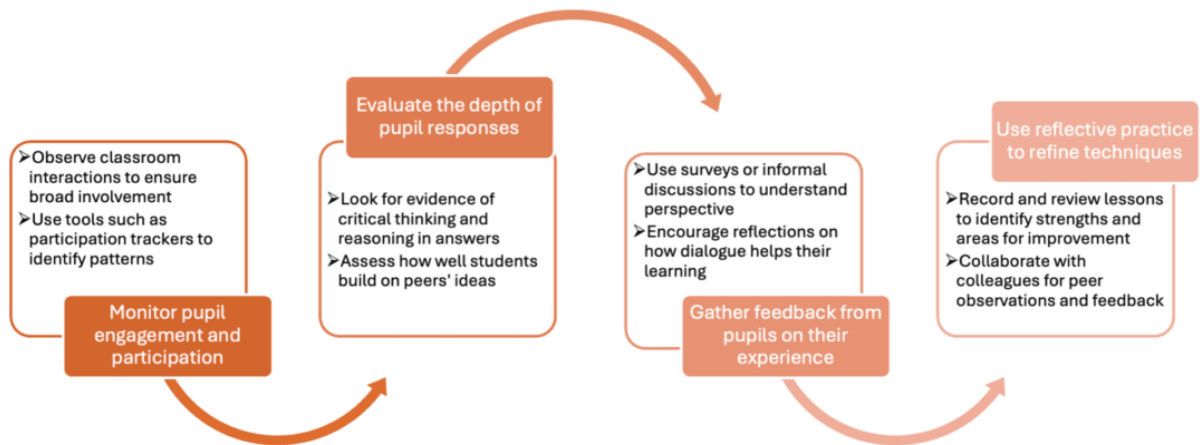


Figure 3: Analysis of dialogic pedagogical features

Key findings

The learning impact of the project is presented through three overarching themes, evidenced in more detail through the Laurel Trust project report and further impact reports (Goddard, 2025; Hodgson, 2025; Stephenson, 2026).

1. Impact on social and emotional development

The project evidenced growth in pupils' emotional inquiry, teamwork and imaginative freedom. Pupils reported greater empathy, collaboration and confidence in sharing ideas. Teachers noted improvements in pupils' ability to navigate conflict, articulate emotions and engage deeply with learning tasks.

Reflecting on cause and consequence, pupils were able to see their actions and what that could potentially be with regards to future aspirations. You don't often hear the reason why they think things. Sometimes we'll ask them what do you think and they give you a response and say, "yes, that's good, thank you," and onto the next person, but they gave you a real reason as to why they were so passionate about doing something – it didn't matter what their friends thought; they had their reasons for doing and making their own decisions. (Teacher)

Narrative inquiry, drama techniques and storytelling enriched pupils' understanding of historical and cultural contexts. Subcategories were mapped against all 8 dispositions by teachers who came to find the shared language and pedagogical structure useful, mapping the dispositions to their school values.

Pupil conversations evidenced a new understanding of how social-emotional learning was experienced through the collective, creative learning process. Openness traits were linked to increased creativity, imaginative possibility and ethical agency. Children noted greater enjoyment in school:

I felt really creative. Usually in a morning I hate getting up and having to go to school. But then when I knew that we had drama on, I actually wanted to get up and go to school. (Child)

These critical insights from children are represented in **Figure 4**.



Figure 4: Eight Dispositions for Collective Creativity, Social-Emotional Wellbeing and Ethical Action (drawn from children's experiences across Doncaster schools)

2. Impact on pupils with SEND

Drama worldbuilding proved highly inclusive, enabling pupils with SEND to engage more confidently and collaboratively. Teachers observed marked improvements in communication, memory retention and emotional regulation. Twelve case studies highlighted how imaginative learning environments and multiple modes of communication allowed these pupils to 'exceed' expectations across domains of learning.

I have got a child who is on a support plan, and she struggles with memory and recall. She came out with the best response; she was able to recall so much. It made me reflect on how this process of storytelling is enabling her to recall. Her support plan is focused on memory, and it was a real wow moment. (Teacher)

3. Impact on teacher development

At the beginning of the project, 66 per cent of colleagues stated that they were not very confident in using drama in the classroom. By the end of the project, 100 per cent of participating teachers reported increased confidence and enthusiasm to embed drama worldbuilding in the classroom, clearly articulating the value of the approach. They described the approach as transformative, equipping them with versatile strategies to enhance classroom engagement and learning. Many teachers assumed leadership roles, sharing their expertise across the trust in years two and three. The dispositions were used to recognise features of the pedagogy by teachers as they became story experts. The CEO of the trust has also developed a leadership framework for all schools based on the project.

We teach them the knowledge, but now they live it through the story and that's where they become really invested in it. It gave us that time and that space to apply new pedagogy for ourselves. A lot of pupils were able to share and talk about their heritage. It brought the history learning into the present times – we reflected on what it means to share culture or accept culture and how these impact where we are and what we learn from each other and take from people. (Teacher)

Discussions

This is definitely a new way of working and a different way of listening to the children. Not just expecting one answer but delving a bit deeper and asking them why do you think that, what leads you to that decision? (Teacher)

The findings demonstrate improvements in pupil confidence, social-emotional literacy, teamwork, language proficiency and the ability to think critically and solve problems and conflicts. Crucially, children linked the dispositional learning to increased aspiration, wellbeing and understanding of real-world problems (such as climate change) through ethical decision-making. The research consolidates longitudinal findings from research across eight Bradford primary schools (Stephenson and Patel, 2024).

Our research shines a light on the value of collective creativity because the learning was relational. Improvements in academic and social-emotional learning outcomes were tied to the pedagogical features of the worldbuilding curriculum approach, which supported the 'rehearsal' of social-emotional competencies for ethical action. These included:

- collective problem solving and collective creativity
- oracy and inquiry-based methods
- drama pedagogies
- reciprocal, diverse language registers
- pupil-to-pupil talk
- imaginative possibility.

The findings highlight that children were not only engaging emotionally but also reflecting on those emotions as part of collective decision-making. This supports the development of ethical agency, as learners interpret, negotiate and act upon emotional experiences within shared contexts.

Conclusions

Creative pedagogies offered inclusive, multimodal approaches that particularly benefit pupils with SEND, strengthening engagement, participation and depth of understanding. Impact is evidenced in pupils' increased confidence, empathy and collaboration, alongside sharper reasoning, more sustained dialogue and the ability to justify decisions within complex contexts. Social-emotional learning was not an 'add-on' but integral to curriculum enactment. Teachers crafted pedagogy through intentional use of dialogue, narrative and structured reflection, enabling pupils to connect emotional experience with cognitive processes and ethical judgement. Embedding meta-affective reflection supported pupils to interrogate feelings, evaluate consequences and act with increasing agency and care.

This research highlights the critical role of creative leadership in sustaining curriculum change over time, as well as partnerships with universities. It offers an original contribution by evidencing how creative pedagogy can be embedded across three years through iterative cycles of co-planning, co-teaching and reflection, supported by distributed expertise. Leaders should position creative pedagogies as central to curriculum aims, align them with national priorities around RSHE, wellbeing and life skills, and protect time for collaborative professional learning in order to enable deep, lasting change. The research argues that policy in England must place greater value on the learning potential of creative pedagogies, drawing on empirical evidence.

Story Makers Company artists: Siara Illing-Ahmed, John Mee (Alive and Kicking Theatre), Daniel Ingram-Brown, Carly Clarke (Chol Theatre), www.storymakersco.com/why-story

References

- Burroughs MD and Barkauskas NJ (2017) Educating the whole child: Social-emotional learning and ethics education. *Ethics and Education* 12(2): 218-232.
- Craft A (2015) Possibility thinking. In: Wegerif R, Li L and Kaufman JC (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of Research on Teaching Thinking*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 346-375.
- Cremin T and Chappell K (2021) Creative pedagogies: A systematic review. *Research Papers in Education* 36(3): 299-331.
- DeBellis VA and Goldin GA (2006) Affect and meta-affect in mathematical problem solving: A representational perspective. *Educational Studies in mathematics* 63(2): 131-147.
- Department for Education (DfE) (2025) Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final report. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report (accessed 5 May 2026).
- Gedikoglu M (2021) Social and emotional learning: An evidence review and synthesis of key issues. Education Policy Institute. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/social-and-emotional-learning> (accessed 5 May 2026).
- Goddard B (2025) A class act. In: *Celebrating Research that Gets Results*. The Laurel Trust, pp. 16-23. Available at: <https://laureltrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Research-Results-Vol4-2025.pdf> (accessed 5 May 2026).
- Heathcote D and Bolton G (1994) *Drama for Learning: Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert Approach to Education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Hodgson R (2025) From project to practice: Embedding storytelling for lasting impact. In: *Update*. The Laurel Trust, pp. 6-9. Available at: <https://laureltrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Laurel-Trust-update-15-Winter-2025-e-newsletter-AW-LO.pdf> (accessed 5 May 2026).
- Messiou K (2019) Collaborative action research: Facilitating inclusion in schools. *Educational Action Research* 27(2): 197-209.
- OECD (2019) Conceptual learning framework: Student agency for 2030. Available at: www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/projects/edu/education-2040/concept-notes/Student_Agency_for_2030_concept_note.pdf (accessed 5 May 2026).
- Roberts H and Kidd D (2018) *Uncharted Territories: Adventures in Learning*. Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.

Stephenson L (2021) Rewilding curriculum through drama: Creative-critical thinking in the classroom. Affective stories of creativity-struggle-hope-wellbeing. PhD Thesis. Leeds Beckett University, UK.

Stephenson L (2023) Collective creativity and wellbeing dispositions: Children's perceptions of learning through drama. *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 47: 101188.

Stephenson L (2025) Rewilding curriculum: Cultivating affective dispositions for co-agency, collective creativity, and wellbeing with children through drama pedagogy. *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 58:101823.

Stephenson L (2026) Eight dispositions for collective creativity, social-emotional wellbeing and ethical action. Leeds Beckett University and Story Makers Company. Available at: <https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/12837> (accessed 5 May 2026).

Stephenson L and Patel N (2025) Activating (oracy) embodied-dialogic and cultural literacies through drama worldbuilding pedagogy across the primary curriculum. *L1: Educational Studies in Language and Literature* 25(1): 1-42.

Sternberg RJ (2021) Transformational creativity: The link between creativity, wisdom, and the solution of global problems. *Philosophies* 6(3): 75.