

Institution: Leeds Beckett University		
Unit of Assessment: 23 Education		
Title of case study: Story Makers Company – improving young people’s wellbeing, aspirations and creative writing through drama		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2017 - present		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Lisa Stephenson	Senior Lecturer, Founder Story Makers Company	2008 – present
Tom Dobson	Course Director, Research Lead	2005 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017 onwards		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) Story Makers Company (SMC) was established in 2017 by Lisa Stephenson alongside academics, students, teachers and artist educators concerned with the lack of creative opportunities for young people’s voice inside and outside school, particularly from socially underrepresented and economically disadvantaged communities. Work in schools in Leeds and Bradford, The Story Rebels Festival (2019) and an online immersive storytelling experience have given approximately 800 young people and their families the opportunity to develop their creativities and improve their wellbeing through participation in the arts. The innovative Story Makers Press (SMP) has raised the aspirations of 50 children and their peers by valuing their marginalised voices in co-constructing and publishing 3 books, which are available from Leeds libraries alongside Teachers’ Guides. SMC’s collaboration with schools, has resulted in the embedding of curriculum learning through drama for 100 primary schools in Bradford that has improved young people’s creative outputs, as well as influencing the creative practice of local artist educators and teachers.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) The Gove reforms to the curriculum have resulted in the creative arts and creative writing being marginalised in school timetables in favour of basic skills and STEM. There is also a sharp rise in wellbeing concerns in schools. Practice-based research conducted in the Carnegie School of Education since 2014 has explored how drama and creative writing can be incorporated and developed in different settings to engage meaningfully young people in their creative learning.</p> <p>The theoretical foundation for the press research was developed by Dobson (R1), who first used ‘hybrid’ creative writing in his ethnographic PhD study. Hybrid writing involves setting up a community of writers with the teacher and the children and valuing all contributions to co-construct a meaningful and original text. Theoretical foundations also came from Stephenson’s PhD (completion 2021) which maps children’s affective and wellbeing experiences in response to learning together through drama. The study proposes a revised model of holistic curriculum learning and a way to read creativity through a set of visible competences or skills which emerge and are linked to global citizenship, critical thinking and wellbeing. Set against a neoliberal context where children are often alienated from learning, both studies conceptualise processes which value children’s contributions by engaging them in the learning.</p> <p>Hybrid writing through drama in a community of writers was developed further by Dobson and Stephenson in their practitioner enquiry research (R2), which used drama pedagogy to give pupils an embodied experience of aspects of narrative which they could then draw upon to make</p>		

their writing more meaningful and authentic. Working in a school in a 'drama for writing' teacher development project linked to the Story Makers Hub (R3 and R4), this led to an articulation of how drama pedagogy could give children agency and control over their writing – agentic writing. During this project, how children's learning impacted upon their control over their wellbeing was also articulated - this involved the development of a series of demonstratable skills linked to emotional literacy and speaking and listening (R5).

Using drama for hybrid writing has also laid the foundation for Story Makers Press (SMP) – the first children's press to involve under-represented groups of children in the co-construction of published fiction. This complex process is being explored in research papers (e.g. R6) and has resulted in the publication of 3 children's novels in the past 2 years – *The Nightmare Catcher*, *Zalfa Emir is a Warrior* and *Chasing the Volcano*. Each novel is accompanied by an Explorers Guide for Teachers and Parents which aims to develop children's competencies for wellbeing through drama and support with curriculum design as developed in earlier research. These have been developed alongside wellbeing experts such as Child and Adult Mental Health Services (R5).

Supporting teachers and artists to 'cross boundaries' (R4) and develop their own practices through dissemination has been developed further through the creation of the Story Makers Hub, the Story Makers Festival, The Story Makers Dialogues and the Explorers Guides. These provide an ongoing professional space for sharing, observing and reflecting on creative practice together.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1: Dobson, T. (2014) *Naming the Unnamable*. Rotterdam: Sense.
- R2: Dobson, T. and Stephenson, L. (2017) Primary Pupils' Creative Writing: Enacting Identities in a Community of Writers. *Literacy*. 51(3), pp.162-168. Available from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/lit.12118>. Funded by Beeston Primary School (three thousand pounds).
- R3: Dobson, T. and Stephenson, L. (2019a) "I think it fits in": Using Process Drama to Promote Agentic Writing with Primary School Children. *Literacy*. 53(2), pp.69-76. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12145>.*
- R4: Dobson, T., and Stephenson, L. (2018) Challenging boundaries to cross: primary teachers exploring drama pedagogy for creative writing with theatre educators in the landscape of performativity. *Professional Development in Education*. Available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19415257.2018.1557240>.*
- R5: Stephenson, L and Dobson, T (2020). Releasing the Socio-Imagination: Children's voices on Creativity, Capability and Mental Wellbeing. *Support for Learning*, 35(4).*
- R6: Dobson, T., Stephenson, L. and De Arede, A. (2019b). Disrupting aetnormativity: involving children in the writing of literature for publication. *English in Education*, pp.1-16. Funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund (forty thousand pounds).

R2-R4 outputs have been published in 1st quartile international peer-review journals and have been graded internally as either two or three-star quality. R1, a research monograph, was graded 3/4 star.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

In the period 2015-20, Dobson and Stephenson's practice-based research has directly benefitted 800 children in the Leeds/ Bradford area by enhancing their positive mental wellbeing through engaging in creating stories which are meaningful to them. The Story Makers Hub, created in 2017, has provided professional development for teachers and artist educators who collectively reach a further 1200 young people every year. Undertaking teacher development in one Bradford school led to the school becoming a Literacy Hub, thus changing the creative literacy practices in 100 Bradford primary schools and improving wellbeing and creative outputs for young people. The work of SMC has been recognised and has been shortlisted as a finalist for the Educate North Awards.

Enhancing the wellbeing and creative writing of diverse groups of young people and their families through participation in the creative arts

The creative pedagogies developed through our research underpinned the second annual Story Makers Festival, Story Rebels: a new type of hero, funded by the Arts Council (£15,000), which took place in June 2019. 260 delegates attended from diverse communities, including children aged between 5 and 13 years and parents from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. To facilitate participation, funding was used to pay for coaches for 200 children and their families travelling from inner city Leeds and Bradford. Our Internal Evaluation (S3) revealed that 100% of delegates enjoyed the event and the majority (72%) had not been to a Festival like it before. The Festival positively impacted upon young people's wellbeing in a number of ways: they were 'inspired' as their voices were valued; one child said it had 'made me believe my dream'; another child felt 'really proud' of themselves; several children developed empathy as working with others made them 'learn that everyone has a different way of looking at the same thing'. Seeing young people interacting creatively enabled parents and carers to share in and value the positive wellbeing that the arts can foster in their children: they felt the 'urge to write' themselves; they 'loved' the way the children took 'ownership' of the activities; they valued working 'equally' with their children. As one grandparent testified: 'everyone took part and listened to each other regardless of age'. The unique nature of the Festival meant that we had 35,500 Twitter impressions over a three-week period in the UK. The Festival achieved its core aims, including promoting the wellbeing and aspirations of young people (S4).

Our research demonstrated that giving children agency and an embodied experience through drama positively impacts wellbeing and the quality of their school work, particularly creative writing. 120 pupils, who took part in the UKLA funded project (R5), shared the impact the project had upon them: my 'mind had escaped from captivity'; 'it makes me feel free - I think it and do it'; 'No one can tell you what to do, you can make up stories by yourself or in a group'; 'I feel excited. I want to get on with it.' Our work in an inner city Leeds primary school (R2 – 20 children) and across the whole of Key Stage 2 in a Bradford primary school (R3 - 120 children) resulted in improvements in the pupils' perceptions of their own abilities: e.g. 'I find it easier to write once we've done the drama. I think it's easier once you've seen what everyone else has done, it gives you more ideas than just sitting down'; and the quality of their writing: 'Unbelievably, the vocabulary they used, the setting they used, the mood of the writing, and vocabulary they chose... The evidence is in their books. On parents evening the parents were telling me they couldn't believe their child had written that.'

Through the Hub, SMC supported Alive and Kicking Theatre company who received £10,000 from the Carey Philpott Award to capture the benefits of working creatively using drama with Key Stage 1 children and their parents in an inner-city Leeds Primary School. According to the school's headteacher (S10), this was 'one of the most innovative, interesting and rewarding projects' of her 30 years in teaching and it impacted positively upon the wellbeing of the children (S10 - 60 children and their parents) as it 'excited and stimulated the hearts and minds' of all through creative play, resulting in improved writing outcomes.

In response to Covid-19 and building on the previous research and impact, Lisa Stephenson drew upon her PhD research to create and lead an online immersive story for children, families and schools in isolation called Saving Anksi. Collaborators included two theatre companies, Royal Armouries Museums, The British Library, Colchester and Ipswich Museums, two artist educators and the University of Roehampton. The online story, shared nationally through news and radio, was the first of its kind, attracting 126 contributors with 614 comments uploaded as well as direct engagement with the children sharing 140 posts including written work, voice recordings, videos and photos and drawings. Children spoke about their 'excitement' and how the project gave them the opportunity to 'be creative during Covid'. At the Being Human Festival (S2), the artists spoke about how the project had promoted children's positive wellbeing through valuing 'children's fragmented stories in new ways' as well as their 'lived experiences'.

Raising aspirations and young people's confidence: giving underrepresented young people a voice through co-production of published stories

Using drama and creative writing workshops with under-represented young people to co-create stories, Story Makers Press has now published three novels, which are available to buy through major online bookshops and which are sold directly to Leeds libraries and schools. All three books were co-created with groups of children (50 in total) from three Leeds and Bradford schools in areas of disadvantage and ethnic diversity, differentiating the books from existing children's literature as they both represent marginalised groups and capture children's real voices and experiences. The use of drama enabled the creation of community cohesion and aspirational learning. In a radio interview (S7), the children from the first two schools talk about how their involvement in the drama processes had given them a voice and impacted positively on their confidence as they 'got to express how they really feel and create characters that feel like them, which is different to school' and that this 'made us feel more clever and special'. The Headteacher from the first school (S6) corroborates this impact, talking about how 'engaging' the workshops were and how a graduation ceremony at the Festival had helped develop their 'aspirations' to go to University and, for some children, to become writers. SMP also publishes a Teachers' Guide for each novel published, which, drawing upon our UKLA project (R5), promotes young people's wellbeing and has been used positively with 300 children in Bradford. One teacher testified that the 'guide was really useful' and another spoke about how it boosted the 'confidence' of new to English children, giving them 'the opportunity to express themselves in different ways. We were able to talk about characters feelings in depth' (S5). A teacher using the guide for our first book stated that: 'The teacher guide was really useful, and it was very easy to use and follow with enough scope for the teacher to add bits and pieces and incorporate their own activities. I loved the idea of the private thought journal.'

Influencing professionals' creative practice: positively engaging young people in learning

SMC runs four Hub meetings a year with 40 Artist Educators and teachers. SMC creates and disseminates artistic/research outputs in a number of ways, through Story Makers Dialogues publications (S1) and Festival collaborations. The Festival evaluation (S3) demonstrates how 100% of Artist Educators benefitted from collaborating in this way and spoke of how they really valued the opportunity: 'we want to do this all the time but rarely make time to do it!' The Festival impacted upon the Artist Educators and teachers' practices in terms of 'creative ideas' and the potential for research to 'develop'. Equally through SMC Hub and the Dialogues (S1), Artist Educators and teachers have become more adept at articulating and evaluating their practices. For example, Stephenson wrote alongside artists from the Hub and children from a marginalised community about Windrush following a Raising Aspiration day for children at the University (S1, Issue p19-26). As recipients of the Carey Philpott Award, Alive and Kicking Theatre Company were supervised by Dobson to articulate their intergenerational project with an inner-city Leeds Primary School (S1, Issue 1, pp.14-18) as well as write a report which evaluates their impact on teachers, parents and children. This changed the way the theatre company works: '[it is] the missing framework and with the critical friendship we were lacking. More than this the research programme provided us with a support group, research advice, new networks news, conference invitations and a platform for dissemination' (S10). Taken together, the Festival, the Hub and the Award have changed teachers and Artist Educators' (40) practices, ensuring quality creative experiences for hundreds of young people across Leeds and Bradford and in doing so promoting positive wellbeing.

Our work with Burley and Woodhead Primary School (R3, R4, R5) has supported and enhanced all teachers' (14) creative practice, in turn impacting positively upon their pupils' wellbeing and writing across the curriculum. This was recognised by the wider Multi Academy Trust and the school has now become Literacy Lead Hub for Bradford. Their approach to creative practice is now positively influencing the teaching of children in over 100 Bradford primary schools. The ongoing benefits for teaching staff and children are explained by the Deputy Headteacher (S8): 'it provided teachers with excellent CPD for using drama inside the classroom. This had an immediate impact on children's levels of engagement, enjoyment and creativity, as well as giving them ownership of their writing...the model of action research that we used while working with Lisa and Tom; we have been able to replicate this in school when introducing new ways of teaching.'

Interest in Story Makers methods to improve children's wellbeing and literacy is apparent in the rapid increase in Twitter followers, which have doubled over the last year to over 1,600, including arts organisations, teaching bodies and policy makers. Each key event in the impact study is supported by meta data to show increased followers and impressions (S9).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

S1 – Story Makers Dialogues

<http://anyflip.com/lcyg/uosj/basic>

S2 –Reimagining Home Saving Anksi – *Being Human Festival*

<https://youtu.be/-mlBdwli028>

S3 - Story Makers Festival: Evaluation and Report

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1K1zKOiHtNJd4G0ntJh4IKA7IZ3eDOEH/view?usp=sharing>

S4 – Story Makers Festival Blog

<https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/carnegie-education/2019/10/story-makers-festival/>

S5 – *Chasing the Volcano* online launch

<https://padlet.com/storymakers/chasingvolcano> (Reader interview with Miss Crossley and Maria)

S6 – Story Makers Press Impact Case study from Beeston Primary School

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JznXnWE6BIA5yqJLOF8yaG_5NRw4OLBC/view?usp=sharing

S7 – Story Makers Press Radio Interview with children from Girlington and Beeston Primary School

<https://www.sunriseradio.fm/on-air/podcasts/newsroom-specials/episode/newsroom-special-story-makers-festival-on-8-june/>

S8 – Research impact teacher testimonial: Andrew Wilkinson, Deputy Headteacher Burley and Woodhead CE Primary School awilki@burleywoodhead.com

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1v4OGHER6M8zLfalFFv-9e2sjK6s14sge/view?usp=sharing>

S9 – SMC Twitter account: analytics report

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1N2AxhzROGmVZ7htAvg42Gu8Abzt-LJ87/view?usp=sharing>

S10 – Testimonial from recipients of in the Carey Philpott Award: John Mee, Alive and Kicking Theatre Company; Liz Wood, Headteacher, St Philip's Catholic Primary School, Leeds

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bmG8jJ3GVPjo6lCoZi1vDo6XOAhq6Pof/view?usp=sharing>