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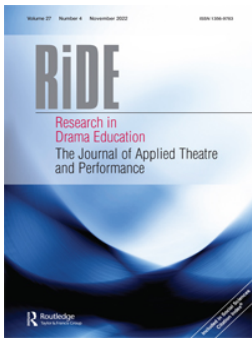
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# Story making in brave spaces of wilful belonging: co-creating a novel with British-Pakistani girls in primary school

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## ABSTRACT

The Story Makers Press is a university-based publisher who focus on making and publishing hybrid stories with children who are under-represented in literature. This article explores the embodied drama processes used in the co-creation of our third book called 'Zalfa Emir is Warrior' with eighteen 10–11-year-old girls from second generation Pakistani heritage. Utilising practitioner inquiry, the paper examines the ways in which the girls used Drama Worldbuilding as a form of counter storytelling and belonging. The project raises critical questions about the value of pedagogies which create 'brave spaces' to reflect the realities of our culturally diverse classrooms.


## KEYWORDS

Drama; story; race; children; belonging; counterstorying

## Introduction

*Making* stories is a way of giving birth to new possibilities that could not have been previously imagined and a way of sharing these ideas with others. (Facer 2019, 11)

The Story Makers Press (SMP) is a university-based publisher who focus on co-creating and publishing hybrid stories *with* children who are under-represented in children's literature. The stories are co-created with children through a series of drama and creative writing workshops. The children are involved in each aspect of the creating and publishing process. This is in response to research reports by the Centre for Primary Education (CLPE 2020; Serroukh 2020) which highlight underrepresentation of protagonists from Black Asian and Minority Ethnic Groups in children's literature. This article specifically explores the ways in which the storying pedagogy used in the co-construction of our third book called '*Zalfa Emir is Warrior*' enabled a sense of authentic voice to emerge from within the workshops. Explored as a feminist project of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011, 2006), the paper examines the ways in which the story making processes empowered eighteen 10–11-year-old girls from second generation Pakistani heritage to challenge fixed boundaries between themselves and the world.

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As a collective of artist-researcher-practitioners, we define storying as the act of making and remaking meaning through stories (Phillips, Bunda, and Quintero 2018). Central to our storying process with children is empowering them to make key decisions about genre, plot, character and setting throughout the storying and publishing process. We term this as agency because children make decisions and act on those decisions together within story worlds. This contrasts with stories which are made *for them* by adults through oral histories or published fiction. The girls' primary school was in an inner-city area in the North of England and their teachers' rationale for involving them in the project was to 'improve confidence in expressing their opinions in the classroom' and in response to 'low expectations within families.' This article expands on previous SMC co-creation research (Dobson and Stephenson 2020, 2021) by focussing on *how* the girls made collective choices within six storying workshops as they recast a South Asian Folktale, *The Inauspicious Bride*, on their own terms through the workshops. This includes consideration of the ways in which the girls pushed their normative boundaries of femininity, creating 'liminal' female identities (Renold and Allan 2006) through the character of Zalfa. These creative spaces are explored as openings for new forms of belonging (Youkhana 2015).

### Politics of belonging

Belonging is a broad concept which has been narrowly defined and whilst it has been explored across multiple disciplines, there lacks research into the field of education (Halse 2018). Research shows that a sense of belonging improves pupil wellbeing, empowerment, health and academic performance (Simmons, Graham, and Thomas 2015). However, what belonging means is complex, in a world of increasingly diverse classrooms. Belonging is not just about who belongs but who does not belong. It can be risky, involving displacement, isolation, and marginalisation. Therefore, belonging is emotional and affects young people's past, present and future. In school, belonging is often 'addressed' through the citizenship curriculum and notions of curriculum inclusion, which are imposed through English curriculum policy (Ball 2012). These policies often promote citizenship in relation to compliance rather than active participation (Weinberg and Flinders 2018) because children are not always sharing their diverse experiences of being citizens but instead being told how to become good citizens. This risks reinforcing normative ways of being which exclude some children's lived experiences of structural and racial equalities (Osler 2008).

Within this paper, belonging is viewed as a relational process, which comes into being between people and things, between people and through material conditions. It can therefore be seen conceptually as relational. Drawing from Youkhana (2015), space is included as an analytical category because space is a concept which cuts across established social locations such as class, race, gender, focusing on the flow of values, ideas, collective creativities which shape the production of belonging (11).

### Reflecting realities

The invitation to work with the 18 girls, ages 10–11 years old, came from the senior leaders at the primary school, who were concerned that the girls 'lacked confidence.'. The project did not exclude the importance of working across genders and wider

diverse cultures but was focussed on a creative response to these concerns by the school. Moreover, there is a lack of research which focusses on the experiences of British-Pakistani girls in primary school (Rizwan and Williams 2015). Additionally, public, and political rhetoric tends to speak of ethnic minorities as a heterogeneous group even though there are significant differences between ethnic groups in terms of attainment, social background, and Special Educational Needs (DfE 2008). Pakistani children are cited as one of the three lowest achieving attainment groups in primary school with 34% experiencing economic deprivation and free school meals (DfE 2015). In their situated study, Rizwan and Williams (2015) explored the ways in which Year 6 British-Pakistani Primary school girls tried to make sense of their everyday experiences at school through the intersectionality of gender and cultural influences. Their study highlighted the ways in which the girls experienced school as a racist institution where Asian females were often seen as invisible and, in which the girls were singled out and suppressed by boys from their own communities.

For young girls in Primary School, making meaning of themselves in relation to the world can also be problematised in the ways in which childhood is seen to be racialised through children's literature. Recent reports by the Centre for Literacy in Primary education (CLPE 2020, 2021; Serroukh 2020) highlight the lack of Black and Brown authentic protagonists in children's fiction books, with only 7% of characters from ethnic minority main characters, in relation to 33.5% of the population from ethnic minority backgrounds (CLPE 2020). The importance of authentic characterisation with 'multi-dimensional individuals with agency' who are 'living relatable everyday lives,' was highlighted alongside a critique of homogenised illustration and writing styles of minority ethnic characters (CLPE 2020, 23). In an analysis review of four Africana Cinderella stories which reflect the complexity and diversity of Black cultural experiences within continental Africa, Yenika-Agbaw (2014) also highlights issues about female tropes in fairy tales which engender race as heterogeneous, problematising the ways in which cultures depict race as a generic category. Noticing the agency afforded to a character is cited as one way to focus on the ways in which characters are racialised and begin to challenge these stereotypes. In line with Yenika-Agbaw (2014), we argue that immersing children in the literature that is representative of multiple realities and voices within racial groups is paramount in engaging in this 'complicated conversation' (Yenika-Agbaw 2014, 247).

## Counterstorying

Theoretically, this paper draws from notions of brave space (Arao and Clemens 2013), applied drama (Stephenson 2022), feminist theory (Ahmed 2011, 2014, 2016) and counterstorytelling in critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2001) to notice the ways that new forms of belonging were created through story making processes. Critical race theory employs the concept of counterstories, or unofficial stories that challenge the master narrative of those in power (Kelly 2017). Although people from dominant groups often fail to explore counterstories, they can challenge the status quo and call for a reallocation of power (Delgado, 2013 in Kelly 2017). Within our project, we aimed to challenge deficit models of race and identity by exploring how creative (story

making) pedagogy might offer an affirmative space for creating oppositional racial identities as a source of pride and resistance (Sajnani 2012).

As a collective group of artist practitioner-researchers we viewed our project as a feminist project. This is because the project was actively embracing complexity and focusing on caring for relations by creating spaces for the girls to co-create stories on their own terms. In her seminal work *Feminist Killjoy*, Ahmed (2016) reminds us that 'feminism creates difficult, messy concepts' where 'noticing becomes a political form of labour in order to disrupt the flow of normative traffic' (12). Within this project we used practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2015), in two ways: Firstly, to explore our own power, positionality and fragility as artist practitioner-researchers, considering the ways in which we affected the storying and publishing processes. Secondly, to notice the ways that the girls enacted a sense of agency and collective belonging through and within the story making workshop spaces. The combination of these critical observations provided an action research (McNiff 2013) feedback loop from which to frame workshops in response to the girls.

### Safe or brave space?

Notions of safe and brave spaces have often been used to explore social justice work and education. Safe spaces describe environments in which learners are willing and able to participate honestly with challenging issues. However, the term safe space has been problematised because all learning requires risk. Furthermore, claiming safe spaces can be counterproductive as it promises to protect/exempt people from the struggle and complexity that real learning and growth requires (Arao and Clemens 2013). The language of safety risks encouraging 'entrenchment of privilege of those who do not feel they need to be vulnerable' (Arao and Clemens 2013, 140), particularly in relation to marginalised groups.

Opting for brave spaces as a term rather than safe spaces, incorporates the notion associated with risk taking in order to see things in different ways (Cook-Sather 2016). It implies that those who enter the space must have the courage to take risks, but they will be supported. The shift from safe spaces to brave spaces advocated by Arao and Clemens (2013) in social justice work focuses attention on active engagement and agency of participants within the learning. However, we also acknowledge that the notion of brave spaces is problematic and can also place emphasis on marginalised students to share their trauma and raises questions about who is brave and safe in the space (Verduzco-Baker 2018). We explore story making as pedagogy which can hold safe affirmative spaces, but which also must address a call to action within the fiction. This moves into brave spaces but works in particular ways to both challenge and protect. As artist practitioner-researchers, we needed to work pedagogically in ways to challenge our own positionality and power within the group. It is a call to action for practitioners to also be 'brave' in their own responses holding these 'modified brave spaces' (Verduzco-Baker 2018).

### Drama worldbuilding: activating collective agency

Drama pedagogy is concerned with collective emotion in action. When considering both the tone and mode of engagement for brave spaces, Verduzco-Baker (2018)

suggests the use of 'virtual accounts' of narratives rather than relying on pupils to share trauma. Within the workshops we used drama and creative writing processes to create affirmative spaces of action within fictional contexts, opening potential spaces for counterstories. Drama pedagogy works in unique ways which value and encourage the sharing of multiple perspectives and viewpoints, inviting both participants and practitioners to work together in a shared 'dialogic conversation' (Edmiston and Beach 2017, 11) through exploration of a fictional dilemma. Participants are given shared responsibility about decisions. This creates potential spaces of collective agentic action.

Over a two-month period we ran six, two-hour drama workshops with the girls in their primary school. Within this paper, we utilise an applied conceptualisation of story making called Drama Worldbuilding (Stephenson 2022).

1. The drama is 'framed' by the drama practitioner in order to give skilful, flexible direction to the learning in response to the learners.
2. The drama involves children actively building and making shared imagined worlds with negotiated rules on their own terms. There are multiple possibilities within the same event.
3. The focus of the work is on relational connections, dispositional learning and collective problem solving rather than curriculum content.
4. Children and practitioners use a range of creative expressions and have a thought journal for free writing and drawing.
5. The imaginary world is co-created to illuminate aspects of the participants lived experiences using a range of multi-modal literacies and expressions.

Drama Worldbuilding moves through three phases:

1. **Invitation** or moving into the story
2. **Exploration** or moving through the story together and critically exploring multiple interpretations of the narrative
3. **Discovery** or *moving beyond the story and enacting new narratives* (Stephenson 2023)

Within this mode of drama, there is always collective response-ability (Oliver 2015), in other words an ethical obligation to respond and be responded to within these challenging fictional situations. Within our workshops, a range of drama, creative writing and visual storying techniques were used to enable opportunities for participants to create, share and change collaborative story moments. These are viewed as shared dramatic encounters (Edmiston 2015), which were always relational and emotive. Children were encouraged to move fluidly between roles as actor, audience, writer, and director, as they shared their fictional narratives and created 'dramatic texts' (Edmiston 2015) with the whole class. In this sense, the storying process had the potential to enact collective authorship (Edmiston 2015) because it was collectively created and collectively interpreted (Phillips, Bunda, and Quintero 2018). We were also interested to notice if, where and how the girls used Drama Worldbuilding as a form of counterstorytelling.

## Project outline, participants and methodology

The project took place in an inner-city Primary school in a low socio-economic area of the north of England. Eighteen girls from second generation Pakistani heritage ages 10–11 years were involved over a three-month process from April to June 2019. The two male class teachers were interviewed at the beginning of the project. Initially they had only selected eleven girls to be part of the project as they were higher level literacy learners. The Story Makers team (Authors 1, 2 and 3) included seven further girls who were deemed to be low level writers with special educational needs.

Within this paper, we draw from our own experiences as workshop multi-voiced artist-practitioner-researchers (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2015). This involved us with individual specific roles within the project who all contributed to reflections in and through the drama workshop: Author 1 as 'drama worldbuilder'; Author 2 as editor and publisher; Authors 3 and 4 as writers. Author 4, a South Asian young woman herself on an Undergraduate course at the University, attended the workshops and wrote the first draft of the story. The inclusion of Author 4, who was mentored by the SMP team was a critical aspect of diverse perspectives and understanding within the team, which otherwise consisted of predominantly white, non-racialised adults.

Our rigour came from our continuous reflective and reflexive stance to engagement, analysis and learning as we learned alongside the children. Over the workshops, Authors 1, 2 and 3 met weekly to critically reflect on the children's engagement and adapted the workshops in response. This was an iterative and interpretative process. We focused on the relationship between the emerging story, the ways in which the workshops were structured through our practice how the girls responded. This provided a cycle of action research (McNiff 2013) from which we could challenge our own perceptions of the emerging story and wider positionality. Central to this was critical consideration and recognition of mitigating against the project as one of good intention and altruism (Snyder-Young 2013) which could unwittingly reinforce power dynamics, privilege, or leave unrest within the group. Questions of whose voice was leading the narrative, ownership and authorship were critically explored and problematised throughout this process. Our data generation was qualitative and included our own critical reflections through our journals, the children's free writing journals, story artefacts, images, texts produced attitudinally through the story process within the workshops including video analysis of recorded workshops.

We also explore the girls' responses to the workshops through a series of open-ended questionnaires taken shared at the end of the project. Thirteen of the eighteen girls responded. These were also triangulated with video interviews with five of the girls at the end of the project. They focused on the following questions because they were the most open ended: *What does being a story maker mean to you? What do you think you were learning?*

## Data analysis

Our data was analysed thematically (Miles and Huberman 1994) identifying key emerging themes from our critical reflections, the workshop analysis, and the girls' perceptions of

the workshops. This allowed for a thicker description of the meaning making processes within the workshops. In the early stages of coding across these data sets, the use of *descriptive codes* was used to get the data analysis started. Later, the use of pattern or *inferential codes* was used to group the themes into six smaller more meaningful units. We cross-referenced data from across sources using a process of crystallisation rather than triangulation to ensure rigour (Ellingson 2017, 179).

Crystallisation involved the incorporation of workshop materials, questionnaire responses and pupil and adult reflections and was a useful tool for examining the ways in which children and adults made meaning within the drama. These are represented in the finding through six emerging themes. Ethical clearance was adhered to in line with BERA (2018) guidelines for all the teachers, children and practitioners involved. University ethical protocol was followed, and parents were informed of the project, giving consent on behalf of their children. Verbal assent was also given by the artist research team to the children. All materials were checked by SMP and anonymised to ensure child protection before they were published within the story and in agreement with the Head teacher, the girls' contributions were acknowledged as Story Makers Collective within the book.

### Creating embodied texts in brave spaces

The drama workshop provided opportunities for story making in multi-modal ways which included visual, physical, aural, written, and spatial modes of communication (Branscombe and Schneider 2013). Indeed, the demographics of the school showed that 99% of the children had English as a second Language and that 33.3% of the children had Special Educational needs and so these multiple literacies added more in-depth participation. This included recognition of emotional, physical, and cognitive ways of knowing and communication. The girls were therefore encouraged to make and share their embodied story encounters in multiple ways which felt authentic to them as a polyphonic community using multiple voices and languages.

### Workshop structuring

Figure 1 outlines the structuring of our workshops which were fluid in response to the girls' creations. We were working loosely from the story of the 'Inauspicious Bride' an ancient Kashmiri fairy tale, translated into English by Sadhu. It was chosen in collaboration with a South Asian female Professor at our University because it represented a superstitious story where the female protagonist is victimised and presented as voiceless. Within the story, the female character is due to marry a pedlar, however, her parents have forgotten to ask permission from the local priest, an older man and seen as a threat to his authority, he labels the bride as 'inauspicious'. The latter parts of the story see the bride gagged and placed in a log coffin. She is rescued but does not utter a word in the story.

We selected a few key moments from the original story for re-interpretation and story development by the children within each of the workshops. We did not focus on the original story in much detail only reading first paragraph of the setting in workshop 1 (outlined in Figure 1) and the girls did not seem to acknowledge a connection with the

Workshop focus. Drama methods in <i>italics</i> each using co-create-share-reflect process.	Collaborative Storying Methods
<p><b>Workshop 1 and 2: Building Community and Creating Setting:</b></p> <p>In groups of 6, <i>map the setting</i> collaboratively.</p> <p>Name your setting and create five rules for the communities who live in the setting.</p> <p><b>Body scape</b> a distinctive feature in your setting. Share.</p> <p><b>Free write</b> View from my home</p>	<p>Visual expression</p> <p>Spoken expression.</p> <p>Embodied expression</p> <p>Storytelling</p> <p>Written and visual expression</p>
<p><b>Workshop 3: Creating Character:</b></p> <p>This is what we know about these characters (<i>taken from the original text</i>). Invite girls need to fill in the gaps by creating a <b>role on the wall</b> of each character.</p> <p>-Young man: in love, respects his family, he seems gentle</p> <p>-Young Woman: funny, knows her own mind, in love.</p> <p>-Elder: Proud very traditional, powerful and self-important</p>	<p>Embodied expression</p> <p>Storytelling</p> <p>Visual expression</p> <p>Spoken expression</p>
<p><b>Workshop 4: Creating backstory:</b></p> <p>Wedding preparation- Re-creating a moment of tension using a letter as a devise into the storying.</p> <p>Create <b>improvisation</b> in 3 groups representing: Brides family, grooms' family and elders.</p> <p><b>Free Write or draw:</b> The morning of the wedding.</p>	<p>Embodied expression</p> <p>Visual expression</p> <p>Oral storytelling</p> <p>Written/visual expression</p>
<p><b>Workshop 5: Developing story climax:</b></p> <p>Recreate the wedding ceremony as a <b>class improvisation</b>.</p> <p>Seeing into the future: Meeting the wise woman or seer who is played using <b>teacher in role</b>- "I can see a log with someone inside. I can see a bride inside the log. The log is being sealed. I can see an elder near the log."</p> <p><i>How has this happened? Where does she go next? Create 3 freeze frames</i></p> <p><b>Free Write</b> from the point of view of the bride</p>	<p>Oral storytelling</p> <p>Embodied expression</p> <p>Emotional expression</p> <p>Embodied expression</p> <p>Written/visual expression</p>
<p><b>Workshop 6: Embodying story</b></p> <p>Develop the character of the bride and naming her:</p> <p>Re-create the log coffin and story ending</p> <p><i>What happens next? Where did she go next? Create 2 freeze frames and share</i></p> <p><b>Free write:</b> Escaping the log</p> <p><b>Class improvisation</b> of ending with child narrating and enacting the final scene</p>	<p>Oral storytelling</p> <p>Emotional expression</p> <p>Embodied expression</p> <p>Written/visual expression</p> <p>Oral storytelling</p>

**Figure 1.** Workshop structuring.

original story. The moments taken from the original story for development included: a reading of a forest setting; inclusion of a woman, man and elders involved in a wedding; and the trapping of the bride in a log. Through our analysis we explore the ways in which the girls restoried these events in response to the workshop pedagogy and simultaneously, the ways in which we curated the workshops in response to their emerging story. Across the six workshops, the girls cocreated setting, back story and story climax. As a drama practitioner, the ethics of practice for Author 1 involved a

careful balance between structuring for these moments and encouraging participants to shape and create story moments within them. Framing of the workshops therefore included the integration of 'second order experiencing' (Davis 2010) for participants because it involved confronting challenging material through playful make-believe scenarios. Each session began with a community building activity and ended with a free write in story journals.

## **Findings and discussions: restorying narratives**

In framing the six emerging themes, our analysis begins with the initial interview with the girls's two male class teachers. This is because this interview set the groundwork for the project and was undertaken before our first workshop session. Within initial interviews, the two class teachers reflected on their own situated interpretations of the girls' engagement by stating that 'there was lower expectations from families for the girls versus the boys in terms of prospects', that the girls' 'experiences are not as broad as other students' and 'the girls often lack a willingness to come forward and persevere in class.' This was linked to 'cultural factors' and 'socio-economic deprivation.' The teachers noted that the girls were 'eager to cover up when they did not understand' within their two classes especially as they 'don't like getting it wrong.' This was equated with 'a lack of confidence.' Additionally, the teachers discussed using a variety of 'metacognitive and behavioural techniques' to focus on encouraging participation and autonomy in class for the girls. They advocated that they 'did not use enough drama anymore, occasionally acting out interviews and lacked confidence in this area alongside free writing in class.' These professional perceptions of the girls represent a narrative which is mainly deficit, both in terms of perceived expectations, range of pedagogical strategies and learner engagement. In response to these initial conversations and in line with Arao and Clemen's (2013) notion of brave spaces we reflected on ways to open up spaces active and agentic engagement within the sessions. During the workshops Authors 1, 2, 3 and 4 actively participated in the activities alongside the girls.

### **Theme 1: testing voices, holding brave spaces**

In establishing both the tone and mode of active engagement in the workshop spaces (Cook-Sather 2016), we initially used a range of community building games. These centred around naming and expressing emotion through a game which invited the girls to share a colour which represented their feelings on that day. This was to encourage a collective sharing of emotional narratives in order to build a sense of community and trust. To start with, we noticed that the girls tended to repeat each other's answers rather than express themselves individually and there seemed to be an overwhelming sense of gratitude, excitement and surprise about being chosen to co-create the story. This was reflected in comments from the girls such as 'You shouldn't actually be saying thank you to us, because we should be saying thank you to you, because if you didn't choose us then we wouldn't be here.' And 'Yellow, I chose yellow that day, I can remember, I chose it because we had an opportunity that was only girls and girls that we knew as well and were really close with. Yellow for me was like ... I got chosen for something that was really big and I could do something really good for Story Makers.'

In later reflections and video analysis the team noted that, 'Most seem very soft spoken to begin with. Most colours are bright and happy to be there.' There was a sense that the girls were using the collective group to avoid the risk of speaking out individually. We challenged the girls to create small group feeling sculptures, in order to encourage diverse interpretations. These were cocreated, shared and interpreted by the group, including the artist practitioner-researchers. [Image 1](#) shows a child creating a feelings sculpture of 'isolation,' and 'hilarious,' words which the girls choose to perform and embody. The girls had told us on our first meeting that their favourite story genres were comedy and horror. During this time, we noted that Author 4 mentioned that it was her first day of fasting, so her body was feeling a little confused during the statue activity. The girls smile and some nodded, creating a connection through shared cultural experience.

One group created a horror backstory related to their statue showing isolation, testing imaginative agency further. As a team we reflected on the importance of holding these spaces as there was a sense that the girls were becoming more open in their responses. This was reflected through comments on activities such as 'we can do anything with the sculpture,' where the girls were beginning to both articulate and embody a sense of personal and collective agency. The tapping into emotional literacies in diverse ways was a critical component which enabled the girls to embody imaginative freedom and embrace a new sense of possibility.

We also joined in with all these activities alongside the girls, shifting power relations between us, showing that we too were committed to actively engaging. In our conversations following the workshop, we reflected on the importance of using our power with the group rather than over the group (Aitken 2007), establishing a low-risk environment. Holding space and time, alongside physically changing classroom space for these initial workshops was crucial to establish the collective 'ground rules' (Arao and Clemens 2013). This included disrupting the dominant approach to classroom teaching, and modelling affirmation and respect for all expressions, alongside expectations of active engagement.

Counter to the teachers' portrait of the girls, they seemed to be expressing their voices in new ways by sharing their ideas emotionally, verbally, and physically. We interpret this participation as 'testing voices' in safe spaces as the girls established ground rules with us and between themselves, seeing this as a critical part of gaining trust and creating new connections. Drama a sense of strengthened community and openness. In the final



**Image 1.** Feelings sculpture 'isolation'.

interviews the girls reflected that they had 'learned to work as a team,' 'learned to make new friends,' 'learned to share ideas with others,' 'learned to be free with your imagination,' and 'learned that you should believe in yourself' through the project.

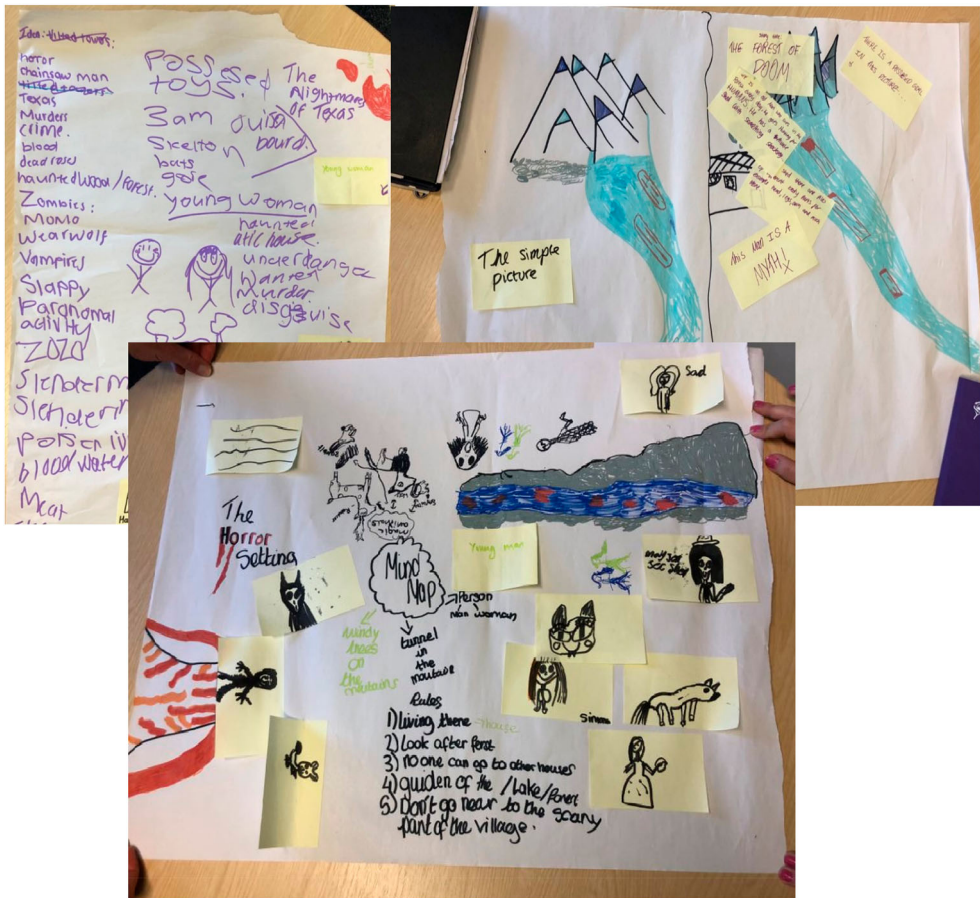
## **Theme 2: storying new landscapes: testing the limits of possibility in brave spaces**

Within workshop two, the girls were invited to recreate the forest setting for their story. [Image 2](#) shows the multiple ways in which they restoried the original text setting in small groups through images, free writing and mark making. These settings collectively became a horror-fantasy genre through their creation of 'The Forest of Doom.' Each image was co-authored by a different group of girls. Some features of the girls' settings included a 'haunted attic house, guardians of the forest and lakes, magic animals, dead roses and poison ivy, paranormal activity- werewolves, nightmares and murder, a man who goes hunting for humans and has a shed with something shocking, there are axes and different body parts in the shed.' The girls foreground a sense of danger 'if you go into the house the young woman lives in, you'll be in danger' and 'young woman will die next.'

The girls re-asserted this genre through a later activity when they were asked to use a drama technique body scaping (collectively creating the shape of something with their bodies) in order to place one 'thing' within their Forest setting. The three groups collectively created: *a book which traps evil creatures, a log coffin which traps people in it and, a shed which captures the spirit of young women.* The girls seemed to test the limit of this newfound sense of imaginative freedom by creating more shocking and extreme violence within their settings. Despite the girls' work in three discrete groups, there is notably a collective theme of entrapment which emerges across their different re-storying of the settings. Within these story making spaces, it is possible to see the ways that the girls were beginning to produce counterstories to the perceptions of compliance that the teachers asserted in initial interviews.

Throughout this session there was a very clear progression from a fairly subdued start to very excited and chaotic group working during the drama and story activities. Some of the girls seemed very outspoken and confident in their ideas. The horror theme was very clear from the beginning and all groups seemed excited to engage with it. (Practitioner Diary Extract)

We also interpreted this as 'testing voices' within the safe space created in early sessions. In a sense the girls' actions draw parallels with the notion of a 'wilful subject' (Ahmed 2011, 2014). The notion of wilfulness, as a mode of persistence and resistance, is used within this paper to frame the girls' collective participation and actions within the story narrative. It is embodied in the stubbornly raised arm of the 'Wilful Child,' a Grimm fairy tale and often used as a negative association with non-compliance and disobedience. However, Ahmed's notion of wilfulness is helpful as a feminist ethics in thinking about reconceptualising 'wilfulness as an electric current, passing through us and switching us on' (Ahmed 2014, 58). The girls asserted a 'collective wilfulness' and energetic solidarity through their story encounters, as they seemed to test the limits of possibility



**Image 2.** A montage of co-created forest settings created in three groups.

within the story space by populating the setting with their own affective landscapes. This is also a collective act of risk taking, moving the storying from safe into brave spaces.

### Theme 3: recasting characters wilfully

This sense of wilfulness was also seen in the ways that the girls recast the characters within the story. Initially, the girls were given the following attributes of the characters in line with the original story. These were:

- Young man: in love, respects his family, he seems gentle
- Young Woman: funny, knows her own mind, in love.
- Elder: Proud very traditional, powerful, and self-important

Through collective mark making through a Role on the Wall drama technique, demonstrated in **Image 3**, the girls were again seen to choose to recast the characters into grotesque and ridiculous figures, particularly the elders and the man. The recasting of the man with a cracked face and soul killer again asserted a violence and de-humanising of the male protagonists in the story.

- Man: cracked face, nasty, selfish, grey hair, soul killer, no blood inside, facial hair.  
 Elder: myth, hunter, witch fingers, depressed because he is going through a rough time, possessed, devil, mean, crazy, weirdo, old fashioned, facial hair  
 Girl: Confident, happy, independent, mindful, jealous, creative, envious, possessed

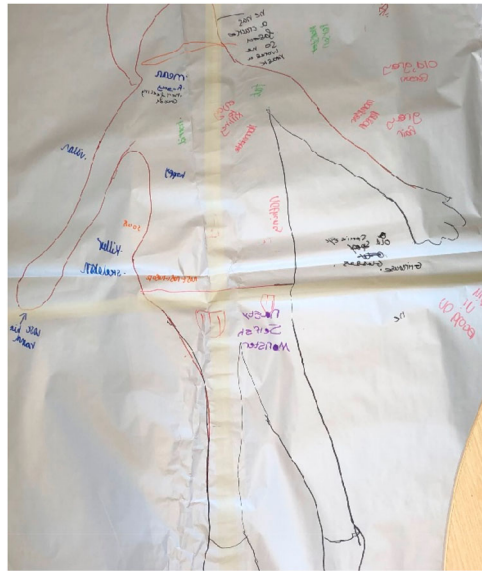
Transcript from workshop show the ways that the girls embodied themes of possession, morality and superstition within their story. Counter to the initial workshops, they are seen to build character profiles on their own terms.

Maybe the man, was nasty because he used to be a devil, but maybe someone got the possession out of him, but then the possession went into the lady. Then the lady remembered everything all of a sudden and she wanted to teach him a lesson, so she decided to marry him and then she killed him ...

Artist practitioner-researcher: What do you mean by possessed?

Mean and evil and don't know what they're doing.

Maybe she's possessed because she's depressed. She's feeling really sad because maybe her parents died when she was little. (Workshop Transcript)



**Image 3.** Role on the wall graphic, the elders.

#### **Theme 4: naming your own reality**

With horror setting and character profiles established by the girls, the team decided to focus on suggesting a recreation of the wedding scene within the story. Each workshop began with a recap on previous narrative that the girls had created and an inquiry question to explore.

In workshops four and five, a group of girls created two new characters in the form of Aunties at the wedding scene. During an improvised scenario, the girls were asked to create a comedy moment. This was decided by Authors 1, 2 and 3 in response to research that very few books for children have Black and Brown protagonists who are funny (Serroukh, 2020). Through spontaneous improvisation, the girls created two 'bossy' aunties who are seen to fuss over the bride in comical ways, forcing her to eat their food in playful ways. [Image 4](#), a wedding improvisation, highlights the embodied ways in which the girls co-created these events and characters, transforming physical space and reimagining story narratives. They are seen to enact these scenes collaboratively with confidence, playfulness, and investment in Workshop [Image 4](#).



**Workshop transcript:**  
 Author 1: *Tell us about the characters you created?*  
 Child V: *(pointing to her friend who played the bride)*  
*"She's fussy and bossy"*  
 Child X: *"I was the bride's sister and I tried to move everything on. Because the groom's family dropped the cake twice, so the cake wasn't there and then the bride, she was really bossy and really disturbing."*  
 Child B: *"There were other comedy moments when she said the bride and groom don't suit each other"*  
 Child Y: *"When we were reading the letter, some of us saw the expression in the bride and the groom. They were confused. They thought we were saying a nice message, but then when they heard us speaking and we all said how we felt betrayed and furious."*

**Image 4.** Wedding improvisation.

The girls collectively reflected on their fictional characters before, during and after the workshops. These were critical spaces for the Story Makers team to actively listen to their imaginative ideas and feed them into the final published story. The workshop transcript above demonstrates the girls' emerging dynamic articulation of the female protagonists and investment into comedy narrative. These improvisations were built on in further sessions and incorporated into the final written story by Author 4 alongside further exploration of the relationship between the Aunties and Zalfa. This is highlighted in the following extract and picture from the published book.

*Besharam, what have I said about calling me Jam! Zalfa Maryam Emir, you have no respect for your elders. (Zalfa Emir is a Warrior, 43)*



**Image 5.** Picture from *Zalfa Emir is a warrior*.

Author 4 stated that she wanted 'to create distinctive vocal characters which represented South Asian females, the types of characters that I wanted to read about when I was younger.' Within the original folktale, the female protagonist is voiceless throughout the story with no name; within the girls' story, Zalfa Emir is only voiceless in her nightmares but very much vocal and dynamic in the fictional narrative as are the other female characters. It was also poignant that the girls were reluctant to name the bride character with a traditional name, opting for Western names such as Stephanie and Emily. In naming the main protagonist Zalfa Emir, Author 4 stated that she wanted to 'capture the strong voices and energy of the girls in co-creating the story.' The girls themselves reflected on the importance of cultural authenticity in later interviews, when asked what was special about the story to them (Image 5).

Well, Zalfa, she's like Muslim ... The language in the book and the language that we use ... It meant a lot because we know the names and we're like oh my god we know what's happening and what they're talking about. And it's nice to see ... this morning our teacher, she didn't understand what some of the words meant so it was really nice telling her what it was about.

In line with Yenika-Agbaw (2014), the girls stressed the importance of authentic voice and naming their own reality by 'working as team.' This highlights the perceived importance of their collective action, including the embodied ways that they enacted within the drama spaces as story makers and our actions as practitioners in holding these spaces. This included critical reflection of our own positionality, values and actions within the story making process as predominantly white, non-racialised adults. Working closely with author 4 as a young British Asian female is seen as critical in this process. When asked about why the book was important to them at the end of the project some girls reflected that:

It has some Muslim language.

I recognise our Punjabi words like: bathameez ...

It makes me feel like I am a part of something.

Crucially, the opportunity for teachers to learn with and from the girls' lived experiences is also highlighted as empowering by the girls in this extract. This echoes Yenika-Agbaw's (2014) notion of 'cultural complexity', where on the one hand the girls were reluctant to take traditional names because this is not a normalised experience for them in curriculum and on the other, they stress the importance to them of relatable cultural protagonists. This is reminiscent of Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' (2019) 'imagination gap' resulting from a lack of diversity in children's literature. For us as practitioners, it raised critical questions about the ways that race, and ethnicity are construed in children's literature, in classrooms and by ourselves within the project. This, again, reinforced the importance of Author 4 as a cultural role model and author in offering the girls a counternarrative to these experiences through the naming of Zalfa and the need for us as artists to consistently reflect on our own positionality in creating and holding these spaces. This included a commitment to actively developing our own understanding of cultural complexity in relation to the work.

## Theme 5: embodying new narratives



**Image 6.** Re-imagining story events.

Within the final workshop 6, the girls were invited to re-create the ending of the story. This included a confrontation with the elders and an escape from a log where Zalfa has been entrapped. Within the final workshop images above, the girls are seen to embody these new narratives, working as a collective on the final scene. Improvisation, oral storytelling, and free writing are used to capture their imaginative ideas. The images show the girls collectively engaged in this narrative, emotionally, physically, and cognitively- moving fluidly between roles as actor, audience, writer, and director. Through the fictional character of Zalfa, we see the girls physically enacting, curating and ‘living through’ their story as they empower Zalfa to regain control of her situation. They too, become agents of change within the story world – there is a dual counterstory. This relationship is highlighted in later reflective conversations when the girls are asked why Zalfa was important to them. There is a sense that the girls admire their female protagonist’s traits and that she is an important role model for others. The girls move beyond the fictional narrative, creating new belongings for others through Zalfa (Image 6).

She seems like so confident. Some people ... and she’s like ‘I’m definitely not small’ and people call her small, but she doesn’t think she’s it. She has lots of self-confidence and other people who are reading the book can like not ... when some people are calling them names, they can learn from the book because she’s not taken down by some small comment.

### Themes 6: collective response-ability: from workshop to book

The final theme, collective response-ability, encapsulates the previous five themes:

testing voices  
 testing the limits of possibility in brave spaces,  
 recasting characters wilfully,  
 naming your own reality and  
 embodying new narratives.

The structuring of the workshops needed to hold brave spaces which encouraged diverse and multimodal literacies. Maintaining these ethics of practice was paramount for Author 1 within the workshops and after each workshop as Authors 1, 2 and 3 critically reflected on the girls' responsiveness from within the Worldbuilding structure, noticing how and where it could be more responsive, integrating these affordances into the next workshops and building their ideas into the emerging text. The girls were seen to initially test voices tentatively within these spaces at the invitation stage of Drama worldbuilding. This was in response to each other, the Story Makers team as adults and the school space. During the exploration stage of Drama Worldbuilding, the girls worked as a collective to push the boundaries of possibility and power relations, as they restoried events in extreme ways. Within these spaces, elements of 'cultural complexity' emerged as the girls created liminal male and female identities (Renold and Allan 2006) within these story worlds which simultaneously rejected and incorporated cultural norms as they disrupted stereotypes. Of key importance to the girls is a sense that the story was relatable, and this is captured in the response from two of the girls below. This is particularly encapsulated through the character of Zalfa in the discovery stage of Drama Worldbuilding and publishing.

I was surprised she wasn't scared like, because she's brave as well at home and it really relates to how we are and our language and stuff so it was really nice we could all relate to it as well.

It's not just important to have characters that look like me, it's important to have characters that ARE like me.

Authors 1,2,3 reviewed workshop video and artefacts in between workshops, creating a hybrid synopsis text. Each session began with a reading of the emerging synopsis which the girls edited and developed further. Illustrations were created by university students in response to the workshops alongside the synopsis incorporating the girls' ideas as further hybrid texts. Following the final workshop, the first draft was completed by authors 3 and 4 over a 2-month period. The girls made edit suggestions following this.

This process was integrated throughout the workshops and continued until final publication ensuring agency from the girls. Making within these spaces was seen as a way of connecting and engaging us all in new imaginative possibilities and new ways of seeing, as we co-constructed and published embodied texts. This included a commitment to examining our own relationship with power and privilege as the Story Makers adult



team. The final conversations with the girls reflect their perceptions of the storying process as a whole and the collective is seen to reflect on the impact of their work on other girls outside the story. The story process itself is seen to affect both the fictional and real world simultaneously as a liminal space. Counter to the teachers' initial perceptions of the girls, there is a growing sense of confidence and free expression and active participation. We would argue that the storying process itself has contributed to this shift. Notions of 'wilfulness' emerge here as a feminist ethic as we 'recognise each other, can find each other, and create spaces of relief, spaces that might be breathing spaces, spaces that can be inventive' (Ahmed 2014, 169).

### **Conclusions: story making, counterstorytelling and school belonging**

Returning to the notion of politics of belonging, Yuval-Davis (2011) categorises three interrelated constructs; social locations, our identifications and emotional attachments with social collectives and the ethical and political value systems from which we value and judge our own and others' belongings. Furthermore, we expand the notion of belonging to include a space-sensitive definition of belonging (Youkhana 2015) which includes the storying making space itself as an analytical category which incorporates the material-semiotic dimensions of the pedagogy. We would argue that within the workshops, the school space as a social location, the girls' liminal identities within that space, their self-perceptions and relationships were seen to change, on their own terms, through the process of storying. For us as adults, our own perceptions as adults were challenged throughout the process through active participation and listening to the girls and Author 4. Aspects of the girls' lived experiences were made visible to us as adults. The teachers' initial expectations of the girls were challenged as they moved beyond the boundaries of those expectations. The hybrid text became an embodied space too. During the final response questionnaires, the girls reflected on what they had learnt through the process. The comments listed below overwhelmingly demonstrate an emerging sense of both individual and collective self-efficacy and self-belief.

I learnt that it doesn't matter who you are, it's just best to be you.

I have learnt to involve more and that working in a team is great.

Now I feel confident.

That you should believe in yourself.

I have been included a lot and met new people.

I have always loved writing even though I am slow ... I used to be shy.

I have liked sharing with each other's ideas on writing, the book and being together.

I have learnt new things such as being free with your imagination.

I feel involved in something that I enjoy.

There are also indications that thinking imaginatively, feeling free, involved and being part of something are affective responses to the process of storying. This, in turn impacted on the girl's active engagement in story making, storytelling and story writing across the

workshops. In thinking about the notion of engaged pedagogy (hooks 2010) as a 'teaching strategy to restore students' will to think and their will to be self-actualised' (hooks 2010, 8) the story making process itself activated possibility and critical thinking. A sense of collective empowerment emerges through these creative processes as a politics of belonging, repositioning power dynamics and boundary crossing for the girls within story worlds.

This view of storying simultaneously challenged us as practitioners to improve the ways in which our creative pedagogy could hold spaces for new story belongings to emerge and simultaneously structure the story experience in cohesive ways. This was always a fragile balance and requiring ongoing ethical consideration. Within the workshops the imagination is seen as a collective tool for empowerment, particularly for marginalised groups (hooks 2010).

Through this project, *Zalfa Emir* was created as a counterstory by the girls, for other girls. As we consider our own positionality as artists-practitioner-researchers involved in the project, engaged pedagogy in brave spaces meant considering our own perspectives in response to the girls' imaginative choices. It also meant Authors 1, 2 and 3 becoming critically aware of our own fragility as non-racialised adults which sometimes caused tension within the team. There is not space to explore this within the article, but it highlights the importance of further cultural representation within publishing and higher education institutions. Within and through the storying process adult-child and child-child relationships became open to transformation by an ethical obligation to respond to each other and be responded to, termed as response-ability (Oliver 2015). The notion of voice became embodied, affective, and multi-modal and responsive with consideration of who was listening and who was being heard. This involved a shift from a deficit view of what was possible from the girls to affirmative action and participation. The girls consistently reflected on the importance of imaginative freedom, emotional expression, and non-judgmental environment in brave spaces. Notions of school belonging become a consideration here, in response to both the lack of representation for stories by the girls' own admission and the ways that pedagogy can restrict or open opportunities for equitable learning. For us as a team, these fluid pedagogical spaces were critical in co-creating an authentic story synopsis with the girls which they continued to shape and develop up until it was published.

In expanding the work, we acknowledge the need to examine children and teachers' perceptions more widely in relation to the published story and workshop pedagogy. We also acknowledge that this was a 'one off' project and there is a need to expand the work across genders and cultures. Furthermore, there are tensions about how to embed these practices further within teachers' pedagogical repertoire. The Story Makers Press have written an accompanying Teacher's Explorer's Guide in collaboration with multi-disciplinary experts, which take moments of the story and provide a step-by-step drama structure for teachers to use in whole class practice. These are linked clearly to a curriculum framework for wellbeing, emotional literacy, imaginative thinking, and active citizenship which link to discrete subject areas of learning.

We advocate a critical need to take embodied story making practices more seriously in education and research as active meaning making spaces. This involves reconsideration of the relationship between teacher and learner and valuing the knowledges of artist educators. This is set against a narrow focus in English educational policy, which often

positions literacy as only a written form because creative expressions are difficult to evidence and assess in neo-liberalist terms. Embodied literacies and arts-based methods (Hickey-Moody et al. 2021) are seen within this project to empower learners, teachers, researchers, and publishers to learn in new ways. More widely we raise critical questions about how the publishing industry might address issues of cultural authenticity as an ethics of care so that all children can see themselves reflected in the world around them and feel empowered to act within it.

World-making actually matters, because worlds have been made to shelter some and not others, so the work of equality is deeply corporeal work. (Schmitz and Ahmed 2014, 101)

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