



How Can Digital Storytelling Open Up Spaces for Activist Citizenship Where Young Children Create Stories of Hope and Resilience Across the World?

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Accepted: 29 September 2023
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Abstract

This article examines how 8-year-old children in a primary school in England develop new understandings of hardship and survival through the process of digital storytelling. The research presented here is part of a larger global literacy ‘Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project’ (2012-ongoing) working across 15 countries (Algeria, Australia, Cyprus, Egypt, England, Germany, India, Italy, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Palestine, Switzerland, Taiwan, Turkey, U.S.A.) in over 36 languages. We build on critical literacy research which argues that in creating texts, such as digital stories, with an ethic of social justice, children have to navigate tensions existing within cultures, languages, and communities. In our research, we look at what happens when children create their own collaborative digital story, interrogating these tensions surrounding ideas and realities of social justice, and decide how to represent their lives and the lives of others. We analyze the filmmaking process and how a class of 8-year-old children create a digital story, *A Reflection on Water*, for the project. As part of the process of creating their digital story, these children walk around their school playground carrying heavy buckets of water, raise money for Water Aid, create a website, and want children across the world to get clean water. These young children become part of a wider digital storytelling community at a global film festival, and we examine their reflections on the digital story, *From my Window- De ma Fenêtre*, created by older 10-year-old children in their school. A Ukrainian child joined this class during the project and their digital story shifted to incorporate their collective response to the Ukrainian crisis. In conclusion, we return to the Critical Connections Pedagogical Model and demonstrate collaborative filmmaking can open up spaces for activist citizenship with young children, and stories of hope and resilience.

Résumé En este artículo se analiza cómo los niños de 8 años de un colegio de Inglaterra adquieren una nueva comprensión de las dificultades y la supervivencia a través del proceso de narración digital. La investigación que aquí se presenta forma parte de un proyecto más amplio de alfabetización global, el "Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project" (2012-en curso), que se desarrolla en 15

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países (Argelia, Australia, Chipre, Egipto, Inglaterra, Alemania, India, Italia, Luxemburgo, Malasia, Palestina, Suiza, Taiwán, Turquía, EE.UU.) en más de 36 idiomas. Nos basamos en las investigaciones sobre alfabetización crítica que sostienen que, al crear textos -como los cuentos digitales- con una ética de justicia social, los niños tienen que salvar las tensiones entre culturas, lenguas y comunidades. En nuestra investigación observamos lo que sucede cuando los niños crean su propia historia digital de manera colaborativa, cuestionando estas tensiones en torno a las ideas y realidades de la justicia social, y deciden cómo representar sus vidas y las de los demás. Analizamos el proceso de realización y cómo una clase de niños de 8 años crea una historia digital, *A Reflection on Water*, para el proyecto. Como parte del proceso de creación de su historia digital, estos niños recorren el patio de su escuela cargando pesados cubos de agua, recaudan dinero para Water Aid, crean un sitio web y desean que los niños de todo el mundo tengan agua potable. Estos niños pasan a formar parte de una comunidad más amplia de narración digital en un festival mundial de cine, y examinamos sus reflexiones sobre la historia digital, *From my Window- De ma Fenêtre*, creada por niños mayores de 10 años de su escuela. Un niño ucraniano se unió a esta clase durante el proyecto y su historia digital cambió para incorporar su respuesta colectiva a la crisis ucraniana. En conclusión, volvemos al Critical Connections Pedagogical Model (Modelo Pedagógico de Conexiones Críticas) y demostramos que el cine colaborativo puede abrir espacios para la ciudadanía activista con niños pequeños, así como historias de esperanza y resiliencia.

Keywords Activist citizenship · Digital stories · Hope · Resilience · Critical connections

Introduction

While I walk, I dream of the whole world having clean water.
(*A Reflection on Water*, 2022, Europa School, UK).

We frame our argument with the language of young eight-year-old children in their digital story, *A Reflection on Water*, as they imagine how our world could be otherwise. In this article, we explore how creativity and imagination can open up spaces for young children to engage in activist citizenship. We look at how the process of digital storytelling, which is based in community activism, can enable young children to craft their own stories of hope and resilience. In examining the digital stories created by young children, we investigate how activist citizenship is about children doing things, experimenting, and learning and thinking more deeply ‘about their actions and reactions’ (Baker, 2013: 1117). We recognize that children are often voiceless and invisible within society, but children’s rights ‘must be protected, including the right to be heard’ (Türk, 2023 np) and we need to find ways to listen more carefully to their young voices and help them to tell powerful stories.

In positioning our work within research into early years spaces, it is striking how often researchers return to the gaps and silences and how ‘research related to active citizenship for young children is sadly lacking’ (Brownlee et al., 2016, p. 261). In thinking about how to reimagine cultures of peace and democratic citizenship through socially just pedagogies in early years spaces, we build on key studies conducted in Australia on pedagogies of possibilities (Comber, 2006); practices and possibilities for citizenship in early years (McNaughton et al., 2007); problematising the concept of citizenship in early years (Millei & Imre, 2009); lack of education for citizenship in the early years of formal schooling (Ailwood et al., 2011); and critical values education in early years (Brownlee et al., 2016). Our research also contributes to key research studies in the field of digital literacies building on the concept of ‘Maker Literacies’ (Marsh et al., 2018) with its focus on multimodal meaning making, digital literacies and creative DIY citizenship. This collaborative research project with early years children spanned eight countries, included multimodal artifacts and audio digital stories, and focused on children’s lived citizenship and everyday practices and the potential of makerspaces to foster digital literacy and citizenship. Our digital storytelling work draws on and adds to the notion of ‘Living Literacies’ (Pahl & Rowsell, 2020) and a research approach toward literacies that recognizes a turn to activism, hopeful practice, creativity, and social change.

The digital storytelling research presented here is part of a larger global literacy, Critical Connections Project (2012-ongoing), working with children (6–18 years old) across fifteen countries (Algeria, Australia, Brazil, Cyprus, Egypt, England, Germany, India, Italy, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Palestine, Taiwan, Turkey, U.S.) in over 36 languages. This article examines how 8-year-old children in a primary school in England develop new understandings of hardship and survival through the process of digital storytelling. We build on the critical literacy research of Janks (2010) in South Africa who argues that in creating texts, such as digital stories, with an ‘ethic of social justice... to protect our own rights and the rights of others’ (98) children have to navigate tensions existing within cultures, languages and communities. In our research, we look at what happens when children create their own digital narratives, interrogating these tensions surrounding ideas and realities of social justice, and decide how to represent their lives and the lives of others (Chung & Macleroy 2022: 257).

We focus on how a class of eight-year-old children used filmmaking, experimentation, artwork and poetry to explore the nature of water and create their digital story, *A Reflection on Water*, for the Critical Connections project. These children vividly remember the driving force behind their story: ‘it was when we discovered that 1 in 10 children in the world have no clean water that we decided to make our film. Children are missing school every day to walk miles to find water for their families. Why? We dream of a world where all children can have clean water’ (*A Reflection on Water*, 2022). These young children became part of our wider multilingual digital storytelling community and, in the research presented here, we examine their thoughts on a digital story created by older ten-year-old children in their school, which initially focused on the environment ‘but gradually it evolved to incorporate their collective response to the Ukrainian crisis and to issues relating to social

justice' (*From my Window- De ma Fenêtre*, 2022). We pose the following research question to understand how we can promote inclusive and socially just pedagogies:

How can digital storytelling open up spaces for activist citizenship where young children create stories of hope and resilience across the world?

Critical Literacy and Hopeful Education

In this section we focus on the turn to activism and hopeful practice drawing on and moving beyond the concept of reading the word the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Critical literacy asks hard questions about whose voices are heard in texts and whose interests frame the production of texts. We look at how critical literacy recognizes the vital importance of children's agency in learning and how children learn through pleasure and play; experimentation and creativity; and critical thinking and activism. Janks (2010) while recognizing the value of the interdependent model of critical literacy in thinking about how 'theories relate to one another in a multidisciplinary space' (211) argues that 'what is missing from this model is the territory beyond reason. The territory of desire and identification, pleasure and play, the taboo and the transgressive' (212). Critical literacy has been called a 'pedagogy of hope' (Janks, 2014: 145) because it believes in the power of language and, in this case, stories, to bring about change and transformation. Connecting children across countries can help them to think globally but act locally and 'many critical literacy projects around the world involve students making a difference, however small, to their schools, neighborhoods and communities. The projects ... used literacy as a form of action ... This included ... stories, poems' (148). These projects involving stories and poems enable children to move away from discourses of pity and non-action and find stories of resilience (Hope, 2017). Developing skills to engage meaningfully with texts enables children to consider ethical ways of being and 'build community and respect for one another, first in our classrooms and then more widely' (Janks, 2018: 98). Janks (2020) calls for critical literacy in action with positive and radical change arguing that it is not enough 'to read the wor(l)d critically if that does not lead to transformative social change' (571).

In framing our approach toward hopeful practice with young children, we draw on recent research with older students on teaching critical hope with creative pedagogies of possibilities. Schwittay (2023) argues that hopeful education is guided by 'values of mutuality, solidarity and justice' (14) and that where 'educators stand in solidarity with students and defy dominant ideologies from positions of justice and care, the result is audacious hope' (14). In outlining a critical-creative pedagogy, Schwittay focuses on art and design including stories and poetry to enlarge the scope of lived experience and believes 'aesthetic pleasure, can nurture desires, hopes and expectations. Poetry's nonlinearity, rich imagery and unusual connections can further expand students' imaginations' (8). Schwittay (2023) also mentions the importance of drama, singing, painting, making and creative writing for drawing in students' emotions and bringing in 'visual and tactile materials to support students' learning' (10). In moving toward teaching critical hope, Schwittay is wary of critical

teaching that asks endless questions without opening up spaces of possibility to ‘re-imagine, re-create, re-construct in radically different ways’ (13).

Young Children’s Agency and Activist Citizenship

How can young children become activist citizens? Millei and Imre (2009) problematise the concept of citizenship in Early Years Policy in the UK and question to what extent young children can be considered as ‘agentic ... autonomous, strong and capable individuals and ... as citizens’ (283). They recognize the importance of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and its move toward a global citizenry of children but view children’s participation as a ‘kind of regulated freedom’ (287). This raises important questions about the type of agency that activist citizenship allows for children and whether ‘children’s interests are aligned with these forms of agencies’ (288). This problematising of children’s citizenship and agency led these researchers to ask the question: ‘what is the “good life” for a child?’ (p. 288). These questions of agency are vital in researching and working with young children yet ‘few studies have considered young children’s views on what it is to be included, or to “belong” to a group, a school, a setting, or a community’ (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009: 192). These researchers looked at citizenship and inclusion in the early years and recognized the importance of practical involvement and including children in identification and exploration of issues as ‘it is this combination of voice with action that, we suggest can lead to genuine participation, inclusion and belonging’ (ibid.: 193). Research shows that young children can tell adults about ‘what makes them feel that their needs and opinions are valued’ (McNaughton et al., 2007: 459) and that viewing children as active social agents involves ‘enabling them to gain power rather than being “empowered” by adults’ (ibid., 461). They found that children often included the ‘natural world in the pictures of what they valued and wished for’ (ibid., 464).

In responding to these challenges of activist citizenship in early childhood, researchers recognize the centrality of play in children’s lives, and it is through ‘play children make sense of the world around them: people, identities, concepts, elements, dreams, reality and unreality’ (Baker, 2013: 1119). We were struck by children living and learning in difficult circumstances who saw play as key to their well-being. We hosted a project at the Centre for Language, Culture and Learning called Vasudhaiva Ride (2017–19) which promoted projects for peace, sustainable living and community wellbeing. These activists worked alongside communities through direct grassroots action and in rural Nepal asked children, whose school had been damaged by Nepal’s 2015 earthquake, what they would like to make a change. The children asked for a playground: “‘They had nowhere to go before,” says Kumar. “This place has become the focal point for every kid for miles around now”” (Ray, 2018: np).

Story is at the heart of our approach to activist citizenship in the Critical Connections project and here we look at how storytelling can be used to reflect critically, dream and imagine with young children. As part of this process, we look carefully at the poetry, songs and stories children encounter and recognize that ‘texts matter. What

gets read, what is made available to read, matters' (Green, 2023: 60). Developing a repertoire of reading is crucial and children start to respond to aspects of intertextuality in their meaning-making 'during reading, and for engaging in text creation and production' (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2005: 168). This view of texts/digital texts as dynamic and spatial builds on the idea that words are part of an 'elastic environment ... charged with value ... entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view ... thousands of living dialogic threads' (Bakhtin, 1981: 276). Young children making meaning in the digital age have 'recourse to a battery of intertextual phenomena ... fictions, visual texts, film, illustration ... songs' (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2005: 169). In creating their own texts, children learn to draw on this knowledge of other media including paratextual features.

Critical Connections Pedagogy of Hope and Resilience

How have we created a Critical Connections pedagogy of hope and resilience? Digital storytelling comes from a background of media justice and media activism and a strong belief in agency in 'the way you move through the world' (Lambert, 2013: 2). Multilingual digital storytelling is placed at the center of our design principles for the Critical Connections pedagogical model. The design principles for our pedagogical model are regularly revisited, reviewed and updated and include interdisciplinarity, transformative pedagogy, learner agency and social justice (Fig. 1).

The Critical Connections project is implemented cyclically with a global film festival to exhibit the multilingual digital stories around a shared theme connected with

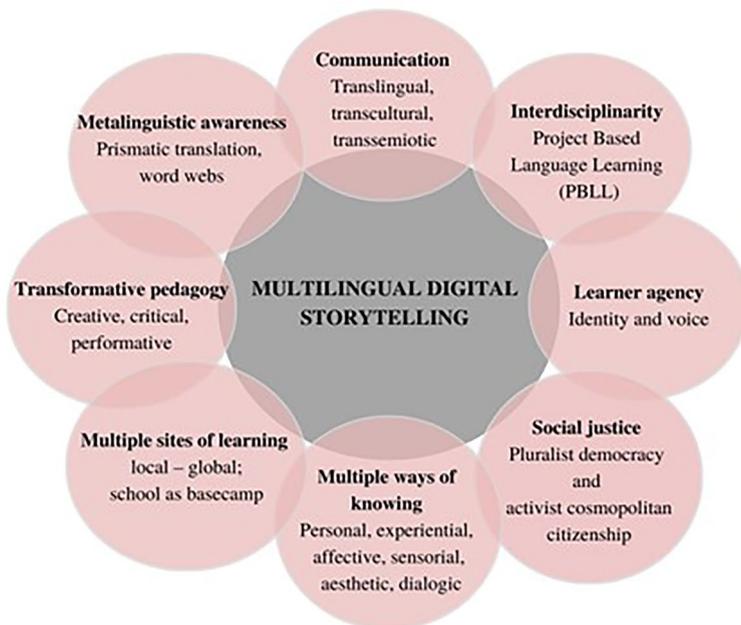


Fig. 1 Design principles of the critical connections pedagogical model

social justice (e.g., fairness, belonging, our planet). Children always start the Critical Connections project through viewing digital stories from previous years and deciding on what makes a good digital story (Anderson et al. 2014: 58). In connecting digital storytelling with ideas of hope, justice and compassion, digital stories are seen as stories that matter in terms of ‘social engagement, participation, activism and change, it is not simply “story for story’s sake”’ (Hartley, 2017: 220). The digital element of digital storytelling provides space for children to make meaning through interconnecting words and images, framing a narrative viewpoint, using space, controlling the pace of the narrative and beginning to understand how the moving image ‘unfolds in time’ (Bezemer & Kress, 2008, 182). The multilingual aspect embraces Project-Based Language Learning (PBL) valuing the range of languages children bring to the project and fostering their linguistic repertoires as a vital element of social justice and equity.

In our Critical Connections pedagogical approach toward activist citizenship, we realize the ‘transformative power of putting technology into the hands of children and teenagers to tell their multivoiced community stories’ (Chung & Macleroy 2022: 273). In the research presented here, we look at how digital spaces allow children to ‘continually cross boundaries across different spaces and different kinds of texts’ (Bloch, 2021: 221). We examine how young children co-construct their digital stories of hope and resilience.

Critical Connections Research Approach and Case Study

The wider rationale for the Critical Connections project was to explore the potential of multilingual digital storytelling (MDST) for language and literacy learning in schools and the implications for pedagogy and teacher professional development (Anderson & Macleroy 2016). The Critical Connections project was launched in 2012 and designed with the overarching research methodology of critical ethnography and the viewpoint that ‘at its heart there should be a desire to “make a difference”, to expose injustice and to point to necessary action to combat it’ (Anderson & Macleroy 2016: 135). Critical ethnography contributes to discourses of social justice and the research process is viewed as participatory, multi-perspectival, and a type of dialogical performance (Madison, 2005). While critical ethnography forms the core of our research approach, we also draw on ecological, collaborative, and multimodal perspectives in our research design. Our research design is responsive to the local and global contexts of teachers and children. This article focuses on the case-study of a lead project school in the UK that has been part of the Critical Connections project since 2015. The Europa School is a multicultural school where students (4–18 years old) can follow a multilingual curriculum and there is a strong ethos of open mindedness. The school’s mission statement is about the joy of learning together, a mutually respectful community, an enriched cultural life, and a ‘global perspective to help create a more peaceful world’ (Europa School UK, 2023).

The case study focuses on a bilingual class of eight-year-old children who study half the week in English and the other half in Spanish. The children are from diverse backgrounds and decided to use their home languages in their digital story: English, Spanish, French, Georgian, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Kiswahili,

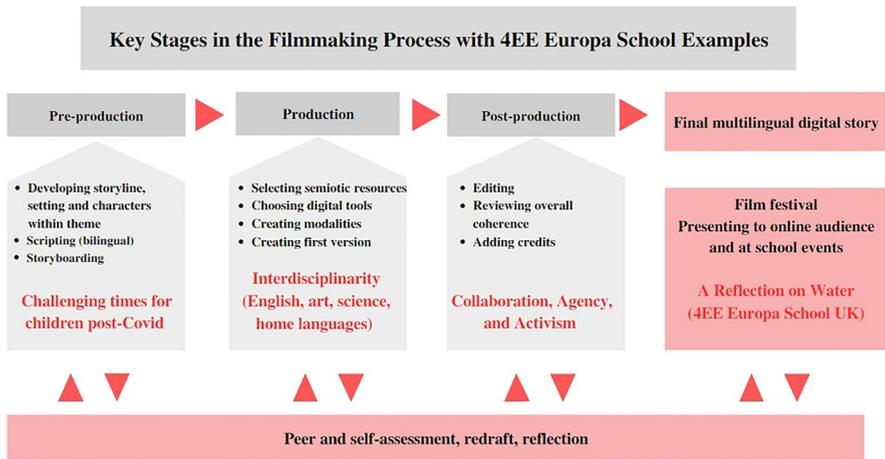


Fig. 2 Key stages in the filmmaking process in the critical connections model

Korean, Polish, Slovakian, Romanian. The digital story brings together the children's poetry, artwork, walks with water, community stories, photographs and moving image. The research methods for data collection included field notes, observations, conversations, interviews with lead project teachers, email exchanges, storyboards, creative work, and the digital stories. The research data was collected across key stages in the filmmaking process (Fig. 2) across the year (2021–22) and follow-up interviews and conversations with the lead teacher and students (2022–23). Key themes were identified in response to our guiding research question to investigate how digital storytelling can open up spaces for activist citizenship and stories of hope and resilience.

Reflections on Water—The Digital Story

In this part of the article, we use the four key stages of the filmmaking process (pre-production; production; post-production; final multilingual digital story) as a framework to analyze the digital storytelling process and how children create stories of hope and resilience.

Pre-production—Challenging Times for Children Post-Covid

The world is so challenging for the children and turning toward the environment can be really terrifying if we are honest with them at this time ... we spent some time, thinking about the things we loved about the world (Liz, Teacher, Europa School UK).

Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020, mainstream education has been severely disrupted, leading to the closure of schools on 20 March 2020 for most children in the UK. Although most pupils returned to school in March 2021, their schooling experience was far from normal. Primary leaders have observed significant effects on the emotional and social development of younger children, including their capacity to actively listen, share, exhibit sociable behavior, and build independence. The prolonged period of lockdowns has also raised concerns about the potential consequences on children's speech and language development and writing skills. This is because some children may have missed out on essential opportunities to develop these skills due to the limitations imposed by lockdowns (Sharp & Nelson, 2021).

The Year 4 class at Europa School, who created the digital story, *A Reflection on Water*, had to go through the UK Covid national lockdown. Many children had potentially gone through traumatic experiences during lockdown. As a result, some children found it challenging to adjust to normal school life again and preferred to stay at home. To support the children's well-being and hopefulness, the class English teacher used a creative approach to welcome the children back to school. She used the uplifting and inspiring song, 'What a Wonderful World' performed by Louis Armstrong to help the children focus on positive aspects of the world and reflect on everything they loved about it. This engaging and reassuring activity was a powerful way to build the children's confidence and help them transition back to school. Collaborative filmmaking with children can create 'welcoming spaces' (Almohammad, 2022: 33).

The class English teacher's use of 'What a Wonderful World' as the background music in the trailer of the digital story reinforced the positive message and connected the children's reflections on water with their broader perspectives on life. Through this project, the children had the opportunity to have their opinions valued (McNaughton et. al., 2007), make decisions about telling their digital story and, in doing so, help them process difficult experiences and feelings.

Production—Interdisciplinarity (English, Art, Science, Home Languages)

I tend to weave the subject together because they work best like that. The learning is more interesting. The water theme is in my science curriculum. I use metaphors, adjectives, similes to explore the language. Then we move from literacy to imagery (Liz, Teacher, Europa School UK).

Art—Power and Beauty of Water

The teacher integrated the subjects of English, art, and science to guide the students toward their final film. Story was used to open draw children into possibilities for their own text creation and production (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2005). The learning journey began with the class reading the novel, *Kensuke's Kingdom* (Morpurgo, 1999) which

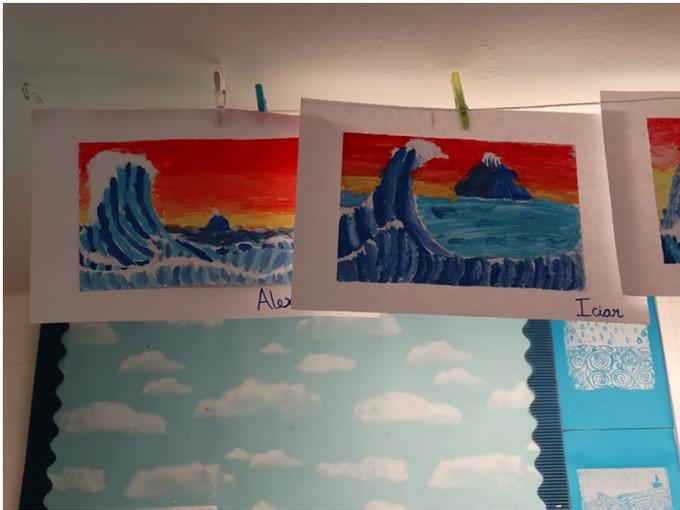


Fig. 3 Children's paintings of 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa'

narrates the story of a young boy named Michael, who finds himself stranded on an island with his dog after a sailing trip around the world with his family. There, Michael meets Kensuke, an aging Japanese soldier, and an intriguing friendship unfolds. The work of famous Japanese artist, Katsushika Hokusai, was mentioned when Kensuke complimented Michael's drawing skills, and compared them to the renowned artist. The English teacher seized this opportunity to showcase Hokusai's masterpiece, 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa,' and explain the painting's colors and the wave's representation and remarkable power. The children were amazed by the painting's beauty. Art was in the English curriculum in Year 4 and the teacher expressed that she was very interested in exploring different techniques with her students, including water color, blending colors, using different lines, patterns, and printing. The students then put their creativity to work and created their paintings of waves using watercolours (Fig. 3). This task allowed them to combine the plot in the story, the theme for their Critical Connection project, water, as well as developing their artistic skills.

The second piece of artwork the children created was, Water, using printing skills. The class was supported by the teacher's art printing instructions as well as incorporating children's creativity.

The printing is particularly validating. It is simple but the effect is amazing. It validates their ideas. For some of the non-academic children, it makes them feel successful. For academic children, it challenges them because they don't feel it is easy. Because it is all new. It helps them with the growth mindset ... (Liz, Teacher, Europa School UK).

The teacher reflected on how young children can appreciate beauty and when printing they could see when they had made something beautiful. They were



Fig. 4 Water—children's printing

proud and pleased and felt their work and ideas were valued (Fig. 4). The children had a great time making their artwork and developing their digital story through pleasure and play (Janks, 2010), and, at the same time, observing and imaging how clean water would look. The children were deeply invested in this demanding process.

We did our own waves in printing. We spent a long time on our artwork. We wanted to make sure it turned out really nicely. It is very fun (Student, Europa School UK).

Poetry—Movement of Water

Children love playing with words. As we said, it is like painting with words (Liz, Teacher, Europa School UK).

In *Kensuke's Kingdom*, the Japanese cultural features were highlighted, and Haiku poetry was then introduced to the children who experimented with the language of poetry to convey powerful messages (Dymoke, 2017). The children were encouraged to write their own Haiku poems, focusing on the characters in the book. The children then continued to use Haiku poetry to explore the theme of water (Fig. 5).

Trickling and dripping,
spurting and splashing into the sink,
gurgling down the drain.
(Student, Europa School UK)

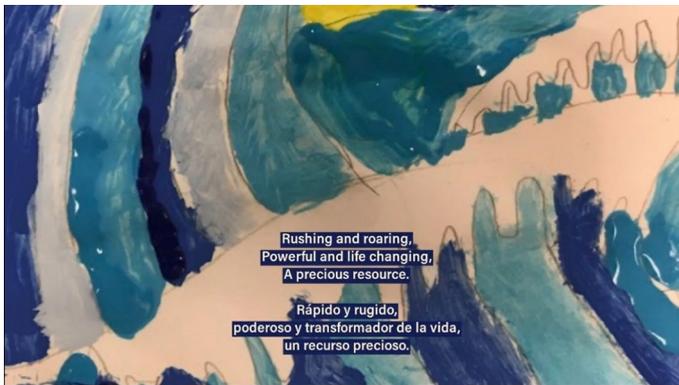


Fig. 5 Haiku bilingual poetry on the theme of water

In addition to exploring Haiku poetry, the children also worked on two-voice poems in class. Two-voice poems are a unique form of poetry where two different voices or perspectives are expressed on the same topic, providing an opportunity to explore different viewpoints and experiences. The children worked on their two-voice poems based on the story about a girl, Cristina and her family. One of the parents in this class, an infectious disease doctor, learnt about the Critical Connection Project and the theme, water. She went into the class and talked about her recent work in Tanzania. She talked about Cristina and her family and how they had to walk a long way to get clean water. The children were able to compare their own experiences with those of Cristina and her family, which was a powerful motivator for them to create their own two-voice poems. Through this activity, they were able to develop a greater sense of empathy and appreciation for the struggles that many people around the world face in accessing clean water. It was a valuable lesson that went beyond the classroom and helped the children develop a deeper understanding of the world around them and how to make a difference (Janks, 2014).

We wrote a two-voice poem. We talked about what we would do and how we felt. We talked about the person who has to get the water. All of us did very well and we expressed ourselves a lot to show we really want to change this (Student, Europa School UK).

Science—Learning About Water

Water was in the science curriculum; the class explored environmental topics and what they could do about their surrounding environment. They looked at COP-26 (UN Climate Change Conference, 2021) and endangered animals. They investigated water pollution and inventions around that (Fig. 6). After the parent's workshop on water access, the children became passionate about the issue of clean water and its importance for all people. They were deeply moved by the fact that some children did not have access to clean water and wanted to take action.



Fig. 6 Learning about water

To deepen their understanding of the issue, the class conducted an experiential activity where they walked around the playground carrying a bucket filled with ten liters of water. This activity provided them with a tangible sense of how difficult it can be to carry water over long distances, which many people in water-scarce regions of the world must do every day.

Home Languages—Multivoiced Story of Water

The class is a bilingual class: they are taught in Spanish in the first half of the week and then in English in the second half of the week. The students in the class come from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, but there has been limited opportunity to acknowledge and discuss this diversity. The project emphasizes the importance of inclusion and provides a space for students to bring in and welcome their home languages. The students were encouraged to include their home languages in the film they were creating, either in narration or subtitles. This not only allowed them to showcase their linguistic diversity but also fostered a sense of pride in their cultural heritage.

For me, the most exciting bit of the learning was allowing the children to bring the home languages in. Actually, we don't just have two languages in the class. We have many and that was really exciting. Sometimes, I bring in Kanji and sometimes I bring in something very different. But to be able to welcome everybody's different languages, that really opens up whole new level thinking of the children (Liz, Teacher, Europa School, UK).

The children in the class were excited to share their home languages with their peers (Fig. 7). They brought in a diverse range of languages. One child, in particular, brought in her home language of Georgian, which is not allowed to be used in Russia. She was thrilled to be able to introduce her language to the class. During the project's end of year film festival, the children had the opportunity to listen to a variety of languages they had never heard before. This exposure to

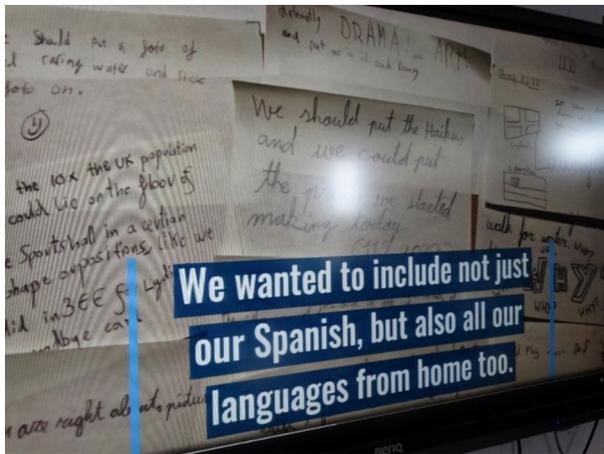


Fig. 7 Including home languages in their digital story

different languages and cultures sparked their curiosity and broadened their perspectives, helping them develop a greater appreciation for diversity.

This project has helped us understand how many languages we speak in our class, which also reflects how many different languages are used around the world (Student, Europa UK).

Post-production—Collaboration, Agency, and Activism

We felt really sad when we found not all children have water that we have (Students, Europa School UK)

The final digital story, *A Reflection on Water*, offers a detailed look at the children's creative journey as they worked on the project. The film showcases the children's questions, their deep sense of empathy, and their solutions to the environmental problem they were exploring. It also shows the collaboration of the class to achieve the success.

Collaboration—Collaborative Digital Story

After having attended school online from home during the Covid pandemic, the children had to redevelop their ability to collaborate and understand the importance of it. The teacher made a remark about the Critical Connections Project:

It is a very easily accessible project, and it gives everybody success. Although it is not everybody who could think of one thing they loved, I was able to work with them to think about that. Once you got access to something everybody loves, then you don't need any academic level to do that. They all drew their

images, which were not about their level of literacy. Then we worked collaboratively on that.

The teacher worked with the children to put together their pieces and then asked different children to read the work to create a sense of sharing, collaboration, and a sense of security. Even those who initially felt unsuccessful were able to participate and contribute to the project's completion. Through collaboration and support from their peers and the teacher, the children were able to overcome their individual obstacles and create something together. This experience of working together and achieving a common goal can have a positive impact on the children's self-esteem and sense of belonging within the classroom community (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009).

Agency and Activism—Stories of Resilience and Hope

The project is about agency. When they meet something which is shocking, it is important that they feel they can do something about it. The sense of I can do something about it (Liz, Teacher, Europa School UK).

The children possessed a keen sense of social justice and had a clear vision of how the world should be. During their research, they discovered that one in ten individuals lack access to clean water, which is equivalent to ten times the population of the UK. This realisation sparked their outrage and concern, prompting them to take action by raising funds and affecting change. These young activists wanted to demonstrate that they could be in charge and make a difference. Initially, the teacher organized a walk around the playground while carrying a large bucket of water to give the children a sense of the weight and experience of carrying water. However, the children saw this as an opportunity to fundraise and help provide clean water to children in schools that lack access to taps and toilets. They created a website and shared it with their relatives, who sponsored their walk around the playground. The fundraiser was a huge success, exceeding their expectations. The children carried 'buckets of water 30 times around the playground, the equivalent distance that some children have to walk every day to find clean water' (Water Walk, Europa School, 2022).

Activist Citizenship—Collaboration, Mistakes, Difference

To conclude the Critical Connections Project, the teacher emphasized three crucial principles: collaboration, mistakes, and difference. These are significant messages that she hopes the students will remember and apply throughout their learning journey.

They need to know they can make mistakes. The growth mindset makes them better. They need to know that two ideas will end up being better than one. They need to know that it is fine to be different, that's glorious (Liz, Teacher, Europa School UK).

A Reflection on Water is not just a record of the project; it is a testament to the children's creativity, innovation, and ability to tackle complex problems with compassion and empathy. It is a beautifully crafted film that showcases the children's successes and serves as an inspiration to others.

Final Multilingual Digital Story—Global Film Festival

The final stage of the filmmaking process is the annual film festival for a global audience. The film festival provides deep insights for the young digital storytellers into the lived experiences and dreams of children/teenagers (6–18-year-olds) across the world. The festival opens up the space for these young filmmakers to share their often-radical stories about their local and global communities, activism, and their imagined futures. In the Our Planet Festival 2022, the digital stories included ideas about 'dreams and fears, reduce harm, break the silence, save the world, change is urgent, social justice, nature lover, different ways to help, rewilding, sustainability, and beauty around' (Film Booklet, 2022). There were 27 languages included in the digital stories and the young filmmakers came from 25 different schools across nine countries (Australia, Cyprus, England, Germany, India, Italy, Malaysia, Taiwan, Turkey).

The children's final multilingual digital story, *A Reflection on Water*, was transformed as it became part of the final screening embedded alongside digital stories from children and teenagers across the globe. The Critical Connections project is about these deep connecting lines between the digital stories. The festival provides young filmmakers with the chance to reflect on their digital story in relation to very different stories and perspectives and open their minds to other ways of seeing and becoming young activists. The young children making, *A Reflection on Water*, were taking part in the film festival for the first time and the teacher reflected, 'it was quite a magical day for the children ... they were truly inspired and ... felt very much connected with other cultures and children across the globe'. In these children's reflections on the festival, they were most drawn to the digital story created by Year 5 (9–10-year-olds) in their school entitled, *From my Window—De ma Fenêtre*.

Because it showed you the good things then our time changing it ... pollution and noise ... they made it into a phenomenal song (Students, Europa School UK)

This digital story demonstrates the importance of giving children agency to frame their own stories and create meaning multimodally through stunning artwork, powerful lyrics, and upbeat music (Schwittay, 2023). In *From my Window—De ma Fenêtre*, the children created scenes they wished to see or ones they hoped to avoid from their windows. The war between Ukraine and Russia had a profound impact on these children which is reflected in the theme of war that is prevalent in their song. Initially, their artwork depicted the brutality of war with images of tanks, guns, bullets, and blood. However, the arrival of a Ukrainian girl to



Fig. 8 A screenshot—*From my Window—De ma Fenêtre, 2022*

the class prompted the students to reconsider their portrayal of the conflict. In an effort to avoid causing distress to the Ukrainian girl, the children decided to amend their war scenes. They carefully considered what they had learned in the filmmaking workshop and found alternative ways to express the theme of war that would be less disturbing for their fellow student (Fig. 8).

Despite acknowledging the many challenging scenes that exist in the world today, the children maintained a hopeful outlook and expressed resilience and a heartfelt desire for a better world that was free from poverty, inequality, pollution, and war. In the lyrics for their digital story the children capture these shifting moods and call for action.

From my window, I can see
The rich, the poor and inequalities.
From my window, I can see
Peace, war, the sap from broken trees.
What do you see deep down, what do you see?
From my window, I don't want to see
The desperate cries of broken families.
From my window, I await
The war to stop, the gunshots to cease.
What do you wait for deep down?
What do you wait for?
(Excerpts - *From my Window - De ma Fenêtre, 2022*)

The film festival provided an opportunity to celebrate the activist digital stories of these children and their right to be heard (Türk, 2023) on a global scale.

Conclusion

We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water (Freire, 1992/2004: 2)

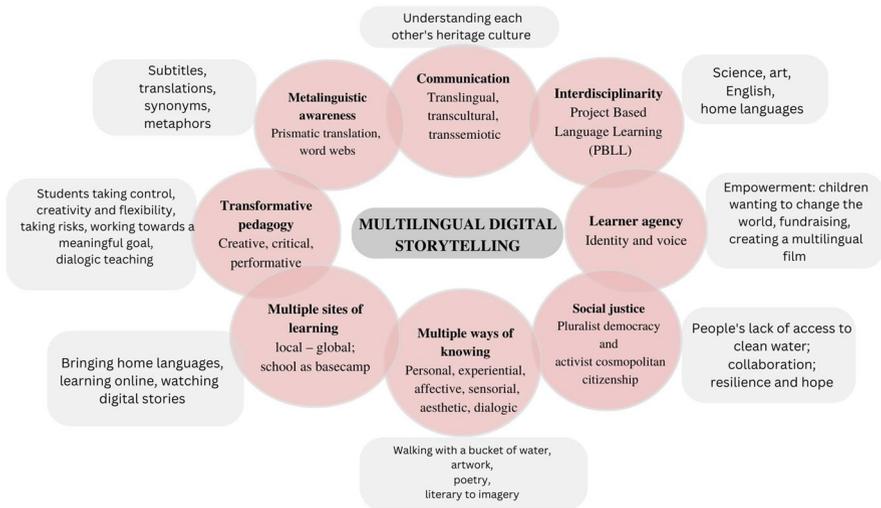


Fig. 9 Principles of the critical connections pedagogical model with 4EE examples

In reflecting on the process of creating the digital story, *A Reflection on Water*, and the transformation and changes in young children's thinking, ideas and collective action, we return to Freire's (1992) argument that critical hope is vital to how we live our lives. Our research clearly shows how children can engage and be inspired by a pedagogy of critical hope 'anchored in present realities and shared concerns of young people, their teachers and their communities' (Mayes & Holdsworth, 2020). Our research demonstrates the importance of building communities of digital storytellers to imagine otherwise and create stories of friendship and peace. In mapping the digital storytelling process of *A Reflection on Water* onto the Critical Connections Pedagogical Model (Fig. 9) we reveal how collaborative filmmaking can open up spaces for activist citizenship with young children.

Our research findings reveal the significance of placing digital storytelling at the center of our pedagogical model providing young children with a strong purpose and desire for engaging in social action and change. Through being part of the Critical Connections Project, these young filmmakers walked with water around their playground to understand what it feels like to carry heavy water, raised money for Water Aid, and wanted children across the world to get clean water. They ended their digital story with these words of active hope.

We want to write a new story, with clean water for everyone (*A Reflection on Water*, 2022, Europa School, UK).

Our research in the field of digital storytelling and activist citizenship with young children is still limited and it would be valuable to draw deeper comparisons with children/young people across the school age range and include different project countries. For example, young people in Palestine created a digital story called, *Drop Justice*, about access to water; children in Malaysia produced,

Warriors of the Cameron, about water pollution affecting an indigenous community; and Taiwanese students designed a digital story about a river's life. The idea of young children becoming activists is not new but 'what is new are the forms of production' (Marsh et al., 2018: 17) and creating 'new kinds of multimodal/multimedia artefacts' (17).

In conclusion, we outline the following implications of our research for early year teachers:

- To create spaces for children to become active producers of multimedia artifacts such as digital stories.
- To act as facilitators in the digital storytelling process to foster young children's agency.
- To develop young children's digital skills across the key stages of filmmaking.
- To enable young children to use their languages, artwork, poetry, songs, stories, and activism to confront hard questions and create digital stories of hope and resilience.
- To listen to how young children want their voices to be heard and represented to wider audiences.

Digital Stories

A Reflection on Water—<https://vimeo.com/753568604>

From my Window - De ma Fenêtre—<https://vimeo.com/719861849>

Critical Connections Project website—<https://goldsmithsmdst.com/>

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