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Using drama-rich pedagogies with the episodic pre-text model to improve literacy

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USING DRAMA-RICH PEDAGOGIES WITH THE EPISODIC PRE-TEXT MODEL TO IMPROVE LITERACY

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Abstract

School Drama Classic is a co-mentoring teacher professional learning programme developed through a partnership between Sydney Theatre Company and the University of Sydney's School of Education and Social Work. Developed in 2009, this teacher professional learning programme aims to enable primary teachers to develop the expertise and confidence to use drama-rich pedagogy with quality children's literature to enhance learners' English and literacy skills. By 2021 it had reached more than 35,000 teachers and students across Australia and more recently in New Zealand. While a growing body of research has explored aspects of the School Drama programme, relatively little focus had centred on student outcomes. This article focuses on one of my doctoral research case studies (Saunders, 2019), a Year 5 class at Gungahlin Public School (pseudonym), a co-educational public school in Sydney's inner west. A range of data collection methods was employed within this qualitative study, including teacher interview (before, during and after the intervention), student focus groups (during and after the intervention), benchmarking of student literacy (before and after the intervention) and a pre- and post-programme survey for students. Richardson's (1997) concept of crystallisation was used to analyse the data. The findings suggested positive shifts in student English and literacy outcomes in the selected focus area (inferential comprehension) using drama-rich pedagogy with an episodic pre-text model.

Introduction

Drama is both a discipline in its own right and a pedagogical approach using the mind, body and senses to make meaning of our lives, the perspectives of others and our roles in an increasingly complex world. This article focuses on the use of drama-rich pedagogy (Ewing, 2019) and engagement with quality children's literature to improve student literacy and meaning-making. It initially briefly reviews the research on the powerful relationship between drama-rich pedagogy and the enhancement of student literacies alongside the pressing need to equip educators with the professional knowledge, confidence and expertise in the use of drama as critical, quality pedagogy (Ewing, 2002, 2006). It then explores one case study of my PhD research that examined the process and outcomes of the programme, School Drama Classic (Saunders, 2019).

School Drama Classic

School Drama Classic is a co-mentoring, teacher professional learning programme developed through a partnership between Sydney Theatre Company and The University of Sydney's School of Education and Social Work. This programme aims to enable primary teachers to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence to use drama-rich pedagogy with quality children's literature. At the same time, it aims to improve student literacy in a designated focus area, such as confidence in oracy, creative/imaginative writing, vocabulary and descriptive language or inferential comprehension.

A teaching artist works alongside a primary classroom teacher in a partnership where they co-plan, co-teach and co-mentor each other during seven, weekly in-class workshops over a term using quality children's literature and drama-based processes and strategies. The School Drama programme has been operating for 12 years (from 2009 to 2021) reaching over 35,000 teachers and students across Australia and more recently in New Zealand. A growing body of research has explored aspects of the programme.

For example, Robertson (2010) and Gibson and Smith (2013) focused on professional learning; Sze (2013) and Smith (2014) investigated the sustainability of the programme; Campbell (2018) explored the impact of the programme on the teaching artists. However, relatively little research has focused on student outcomes.

Drama and literacy research

The literature concerning drama (particularly drama-rich pedagogy) and its relationship to literacy is extensive. Space constraints mean that only a snapshot can be included here. Booth (2005) suggested that Caldwell Cook's *The play way* (1917) was the first record of the use of drama-based practices to teach literacy. More recently, O'Toole (2010) noted that English educator Harriet Finlay-Johnson's *The dramatic method of teaching* (1907) documented her work using drama as a pedagogical method with a particular focus on the teaching of history. As Flynn (1997) pointed out, a growing list of drama academics advocate for drama-based pedagogy to be employed across the curriculum to meet non-drama curriculum outcomes. This is perhaps, as Cremin (2014) notes, because "the key features of creative literacy practice are evident in improvisational drama: it fosters play, collaborative engagement and reflection, is often based on a powerful text and harnesses children's curiosity and agency" (p. 25).

Defining literacy, or what it means to be literate, has continued to change. "Literacy is not a single global skill that once mastered will be there for life" (Ewing & Saunders, 2016, p. 18). As Kempe (2000) asserts: "Literacy involves a lot more than simply ascribing sound to marks on a page" (p. 23). Further, he argues that "to be literate involves considering the context in which words exist and interpreting them into coherent meanings, that is meanings which make sense in the situation" (Kempe, 2001, p. 14). I include three definitions of literacy here. The first is from the national body, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), which developed a national curriculum where literacy is included as a General Capability to be included across all learning areas.

> Literacy encompasses the knowledge and skills students need to access, understand, analyse and evaluate information, make meaning, express thoughts and emotions, present ideas and opinions, interact with others and participate in activities at school and in their lives beyond school. (ACARA, 2019, para 2)

The second definition is from the state education authority, NSW Educational Standards Authority (NESA), which defines literacy as

> a synthesis of language, thinking and contextual practices through which meaning is shaped. Effective literacy is intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic and involves interactions in a range of modes and through a variety of media. (NESA, 2012, p. 207)

Finally, the definition which resonates most with me as an educator is from *Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia*, developed by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2009).

> Literacy is the capacity, confidence and disposition to use language in all its forms. Literacy incorporates a range of modes of communication including music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama, as well as talking, listening, viewing, reading and writing. … In an increasingly technological world, the ability to critically analyse texts is a key component of literacy. (DEEWR, 2009, p. 41)

The DEEWR (2009) statement on literacy includes the traditional four pillars of literacy: listening, speaking/talking, reading and writing, but also explicitly recognises the arts as forms of meaning-making, i.e., literacies in their own right and modes of language and communication.

Within this study, this broad definition of literacy is subscribed to. The research case study specifically explores the development of inferential comprehension as an aspect of literacy. Comprehension is the understanding of what has been read and inference refers to the understanding of what is implied or

beyond the literal meaning of a text (ACARA, 2015; Department of Education and Child Development, 2015; Ewing & Saunders, 2016; NESA, 2012, 2018; Saunders, 2015).

Defining drama-rich pedagogy

Process drama (Haseman, 1991; O'Neill, 1995), educational drama (Heathcote, 1984; Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), classroom drama (Grainer & Cremin, 2001), creative drama (McCaslin, 1996), drama-based pedagogy (Saunders, 2015, 2019), or drama-rich pedagogies (Ewing, 2019) as teaching methods have a long history of being used as a pedagogical approach to improve English and literacy. Wagner (1976) introduced the use of drama "as a learning medium" or pedagogy by describing the work of pioneering drama educator Dorothy Heathcote to teachers who were unable to see her workshops in person. Wagner (1976) also captured Heathcote's approach to using drama to work with literature and develop language, where Heathcote used her technique in "help[ing] a class realise that a text is much more than words" (p. 195). Heathcote's work is reflected within the School Drama approach as the programme uses many of the drama-based strategies either developed or popularised by her. Heathcote's work was, in essence, the first recorded form of process-based drama, before the term had been developed, as there was no performance outcome with students.

This form of drama has a long and rich history. Originally referred to as "educational drama" by Heathcote (1984) and Heathcote and Bolton (1995), the name "process drama" was first coined by Haseman (1991), a disciple of Heathcote. O'Neill (1995) further developed the concept of process drama and explained that

> process drama is a complex dramatic encounter. Like other theatre events, it evokes an immediate dramatic world bounded in space and time, a world that depends on the consensus of all those present for its existence. Process drama proceeds without a script, its outcome is unpredictable, it lacks a separate audience, and the experience is impossible to replicate. (p. xiii)

O'Neill (1995) identified elements and characteristics of process drama that included its episodic nature, a fictional dramatic world, an experience without audience where participants make agreement, and void of scripts. O'Neill (1995) introduced the notion of a "pre-text" as something that stimulates and commences the dramatic world of the process drama. She suggested that the pre-text could be "a word, a gesture, a location, a story, an idea, an object, or an image, as well as … a character or a play script" (p. 19).

How drama improves English and literacy through the School Drama model

Traditional process drama often uses a pre-text in its entirety as the starting point. For example, the use of a story or play is often read fully during the first phase of the learning experience. The process drama then leaps off following that story or text into the unknown. Within the School Drama programme, we use quality children's literature, most often picture books and novels, as our pre-text. However, unlike Booth (2005), who called his work using picture books and drama "story drama" and defined this as "improvised role play stimulated by a story" (p. 8), we find the term story drama implies a re-enactment of the story, rather than a critical and deep exploration of the gaps, silences, characters, situations, motivations and perspectives within a text. As Cremin and Macdonald (2013) discuss, the aims of process drama must move beyond the re-enactment of a story so that students

> … do not re-enact the known, but working alongside their teacher as fellow artists … take risks and explore the unknown. Process drama challenges children to imaginatively make, share and respond to each other's ideas, collaboratively co-authoring new narratives together. (p. 2)

The approach employed by practitioners such as Baldwin, Ewing, Miller and Saxton and others, and deeply embedded in the School Drama approach is somewhat different and has a specific dual aim of dramatic engagement and literacy learning. When using picture books or novels in the School Drama

programme, it is not pure process drama, as the pre-text is not read in its entirety at the commencement of the work. Therefore, I define the form that School Drama employs as "process-based drama" as it is not a "pure" process drama, nor is it story drama. Ewing (2019) describes this as drama-rich pedagogy, which also captures the essence of our approach.

Our process-based drama or drama-rich pedagogy employs the use of a text as a kind of pre-text but explores that text in quite a different way to O'Neill's (1995) approach. In School Drama, the text is often not introduced at all during the first workshop. Rather, other texts are often used to start building the context and the world of the drama, and students are encouraged to predict what the drama and story might be about.

We break the text into episodes. These episodes may be a page, a chapter, or even a sentence or two. Once an episode is read, drama-based strategies are applied to explore the gaps, silences and critical moments within the text. The teacher invites the students into the "spaces to play" (Williams, 1987) and "places to play" (Gleeson, 2006) within the text, so that they can go deeper, drawing on their comprehension and developing inferences from the text. The drama-based strategies can include hot-seat, conscience alley, freeze frames, improvisation and role play, sculpting, dream sequence, mime, proximities, postcards, Readers' Theatre, soundscape, thought-tracking (see Neelands & Goode, 1990, 2000; Baldwin, 2004, 2012; Baldwin & Fleming, 2003; Baldwin & John, 2012; Ewing & Saunders, 2016 among others for a more comprehensive list). It is important to note that O'Neill also used "episodes" as a structural tool when organising a process drama; however, her use of episodes is different from what I have referred to as the "episodic pre-text model" (Saunders, 2015) as a way of capturing the approach that is central to the School Drama programme.

Ewing and Saunders (2016) have further developed this to explicitly link specific, drama-based strategies to literacy outcomes, including inferential comprehension, confidence in oracy, creative/imaginative writing and vocabulary and descriptive language. An example is the well-known strategy of hot-seating, where a student or a group of students are in role as a particular character from the story. They are asked questions by their peers and respond as the character. Within this strategy, students need to draw on their inferential comprehension skills to "fill in the gaps" within the text in order to answer the questions. Research into the School Drama programme has illustrated that the intervention, using the above-mentioned strategies, can have a positive increase in student literacy achievement.

The following section describes a select case study (from Gungahlin Public School—pseudonym) conducted as part of a multi-site doctoral study (Saunders, 2019) exploring the impact of drama-rich pedagogy on learners' English and literacy outcomes in three diverse schools. Although similar results were found across all three case-study schools undertaking the School Drama Classic programme, it is acknowledged that the findings from these case studies are not generalisable.
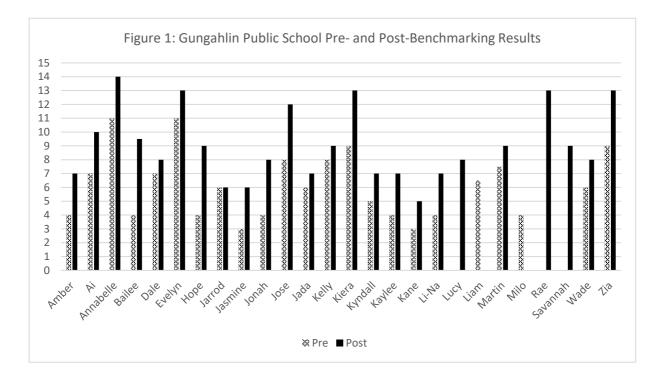
The Gungahlin Public School case study

Specifically, this article focuses on the case study undertaken at Gungahlin Public School, a disadvantaged, low-socio-economic-status school in an inner-city suburb of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Gungahlin Public School has a high proportion of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander students and students from English as an Additional Language and/or Dialect (EAL/D) backgrounds (ACARA, 2017). During 2017, when this case study took place, 41 percent of students at the school identified as having English as an Additional Language and/or Dialect (EAL/D) and 18 percent of students identified as First Nations. The class involved in this study was a Year 5 class of 26 students; 16 students identified as female, and 20 students identified as male. The class was taught by a young and dynamic teacher, Jacob Lockyer (pseudonyms have been used for the teacher participants' name). Within the class, five students spoke a language other than English at home (including Swiss, German, Spanish, and Chinese) representing 19 percent of the class. Nine students (34%) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander: Jade, Jarrod, Kane, Kaylee, Kelly, Kyndall, Liam, Martin and Wade.

Within the research, students participated in a pre-programme and post-programme literacy benchmarking task before and after the seven-week drama intervention. The task was co-designed by the researcher and classroom teacher and was marked against a standard rubric based on three NSW English Syllabus outcomes; seven individual criteria assessed comprehension and inference. The class teacher marked both the pre- and post-benchmarking tasks. Students also participated in a pre- and post-programme survey and a range of focus groups throughout the intervention.

The unit explored at Gungahlin Public School focused on *Home and away* (Marsden & Ottley, 2008). This book contains a series of diary entries from the perspective of a boy around the age of the students. The story is set in Sydney in contemporary times and starts by introducing the reader to the boy's family and surroundings as a war gets closer to Australia and Sydney falls. The family decide to get on a boat to escape and go to a fictional country called Hollania. When they arrive, they are locked up in a refugee camp. This powerful text turns the refugee experience on its head. So often in Australia we think of refugees as "the others" and their experience as foreign from our own. A version of this unit has been published in *The school drama book* (Ewing & Saunders, 2016).

Figure 1 below depicts the pre- (textured bar) and post-benchmarking (solid bar) results. Students were marked on a 15-point scale, where 1 point represents an E- and 15 points represents an A+. Out of the 21 complete sets of pre- and post-benchmarking tasks, 12 students (representing 57% of students) received a below C- grade (below 7 marks) indicating a fail for the task. Of these 12 students (Amber, Bailee, Hope, Jarrod, Jasmine, Jonah, Jada, Kyndall, Kaylee, Kane, Li-Na and Wade), Amber, Bailee and Jonah did not identify as either EAL/D or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; seven (Jarrod, Jasmine, Jada, Kyndell, Kaylee, Kane and Wade) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and two students (Hope and Li-Na) identified as EAL/D. In the post-benchmarking task, 10 of these students (83.3%) moved above a C- (7 marks), one student (Jarrod) maintained his score of a D+, and another student (Kane) increased his score moving from an E+ (3 marks) to a D (5 marks).

Figure 1: Gungahlin Public School Pre- and Post-Benchmarking Results

Girls at Gungahlin Public School generally received higher grades in literacy, and this pattern was maintained. There was a similar improvement in boys' and girls' writing in the post-programme benchmarking task. On average, girls received a score of 6.5 for the pre-test (representing a D+) and a score of 9.3 for the post-task (representing C+) with a shift of 3 marks. The boys' average pre

intervention grade was 5.4 (representing a D) and post-programme grade was 8 (representing a C) with a general shift of 2.5 marks.

In the first focus group following the fourth workshop, I asked students if they thought that they were engaging with the text differently because we were doing "drama stuff" with it or not? Annabelle, a bright and articulate student jumped in to say:

> I think that we are engaging with it differently because if you had of [sic] just read this normally, just flicking through, um you probably wouldn't have thought about what they could be thinking at the time or what they could have said between those illustrations and speech marks that they have in the book. So, yeah, I think we are definitely interpreting the book differently. (Focus Group #3 21/08/2017)

She added:

> Every single week I feel like I want to go through the book more and I don't think I would have got that if we had of [sic] just flicked through it, cos I would have just read it all in one go and yeah, I think I would definitely want to read more of the book. (Focus Group #3 21/08/2017)

What is clear from these extracts is that, for Annabelle, there has been a shift in student engagement with the literary text through the drama-based intervention.

Another student in the same focus group (Hope) remarked:

> It's like really exciting like … like, when we stop, it's like an exciting part after, and when we get to act the characters out, you like, you don't know what's going to happen next. (Focus Group #3 21/08/2017)

This idea of interpreting the book differently and thinking critically about what happens between events and pages within the text was picked up by other students in separate focus groups. During a focus group following week five of the seven-week intervention, Liam responded in this way to the same question I had asked Annabelle and Hope a week earlier:

> Different, because like every week we learn about one of their problems and we have to work out what, like, happens to them and, like, what will happen next. (Focus Group #4 28/08/2017)

However, not all students responded positively to this style of inquiry. Jose, a student who had joined the school from Columbia earlier in 2017, responded with this comment during the focus group following the week six workshop:

> No. I don't know, it's just that I think it takes way too long and it does make it really big and I think it's better to keep it close and then you can understand things easily. And because you can get confused about the amount of things that you have to "get". And you'll, like, over think and overload. (Focus Group #5 04/09/2017)

I was surprised by this comment because I had thought that Jose was actually very involved in the drama experiences and looked like he was engaging in the work really positively. I asked his class teacher, Jacob, about this in our mid-programme interview. The teacher suggested that Jose's perception of the drama intervention may have come from his previous schooling experience in Columbia.

> Well, Jose came from, in his own words, "a very prestigious school" in Columbia, and it sounded awful, to be honest. It was like book work every day, like ridiculous amounts, hugely complex stuff for their age and a very low amount of creativity. And he's feeling like if he is doing anything that isn't book work and isn't written text and standard old-fashioned education that he isn't learning enough. Yeah, so he is a very interesting boy. (Interview #1 07/09/2017)

Jose, however, was adamant that drama wasn't helping him in his English and literacy learning. In the post survey he responded to the open-ended question asking if he thought he learned more or less in Drama: "I think that I learn less in drama because it takes too long to get a subject completely understood." As Jacob had observed, Jose also indicated that he enjoyed reading books and preferred to work by himself. However, his written work did improve from a C in the pre-programme task to a B+ in the post-programme task. His pre-task was fairly short and contained 96 words. It was a superficial diary entry that was not well written and did not infer beyond the text. He also didn't take on the perspective of a character and wrote the entry in the third person, as if it were a passage from the text. His post-task was very different, containing 181 words (almost an entire page of text) and painted a very dark picture of September 29, the day the main character (who we called Tee) and his family arrived in Hollania. During the post-programme interview with the class teacher, he commented that Jose's post-programme task was much stronger than his pre-programme task, particularly focusing on sharing the senses with the reader and drawing inferences from the text.

Jose made strong inferences about *Home and away* in his writing, building on existing information and relationships in the text, but depicting the harrowing events of arriving at a refugee detention centre.

The post-programme survey also contained questions relating to learning and literacy through drama. Question 41 was an open-ended question and asked students: "Do you feel like doing School Drama has helped you with your English and Literacy? Why/why not?" Twenty-one students responded. Dale was the sole student who disagreed saying: "No, because we don't really do both of them" (them being English and literacy; PostPSS). While Amber and Jose were not sure, the remaining 18 students agreed. Some of their explanations include:

> Zia: It has a lot. It makes me more creative and more engaged with the characters.

> Wade: It has given us imagination and helps with our English. But I don't know about literacy.

> Savannah: Yes, because when I do drama, I feel it more than doing literacy and we have more fun and that makes us want to listen to the teacher.
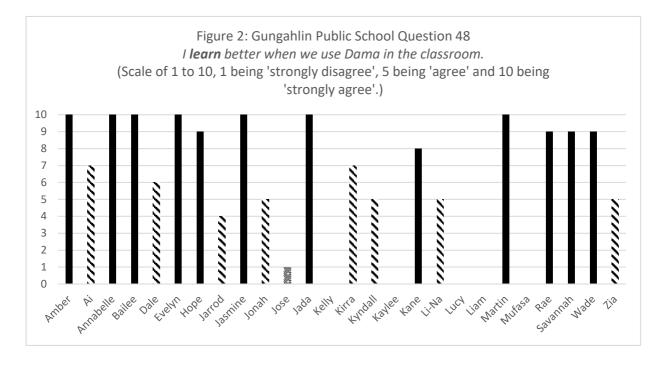
> Rea: Yes, in drama you understand the character and how they feel, you break down the story and reflect. You understand what's happening, whereas in a normal lesson you just read the book or text without understanding or taking time to understand what's going on.

> Evelyn: I think that it has helped me explain what the characters are feeling more. It has also let me have a wider imagination when writing different and new stories.
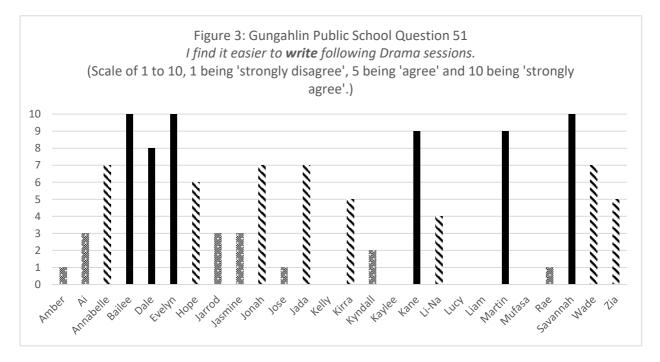
> Bailee: Yes, because I can write much better because I know to put myself in the person's shoes. (PostPSS)

It is clear, from these comments, that some students felt that the School Drama experience had helped improve their English and literacy. Specifically, two common themes were apparent in these comments: some students identified that they felt they had a stronger understanding of the characters through the use of Drama, and others felt that Drama had helped engage their creative and imaginative thinking.

Question 48 (represented as Figure 2) of the post-programme survey asked students to identify on a scale of 1 to 10 if they strongly agreed (10) or strongly disagreed (1) with the statement: "I learn better when we use drama in the classroom." Of the 21 students who completed the post-programme survey, Jose responded with a 1 (represented as a textured bar), representing that he strongly disagreed, eight students (38%) reported that they agreed with the statement in the mid-level by providing a ranking of between four and seven (represented as a striped bar), and 12 students (57%) indicated that they strongly agreed (ranking between 8 and 10) that they learned better when drama was used in the classroom (represented as a solid bar).

Figure 2: Gungahlin Public School Question 48
*I **learn** better when we use Dama in the classroom.*
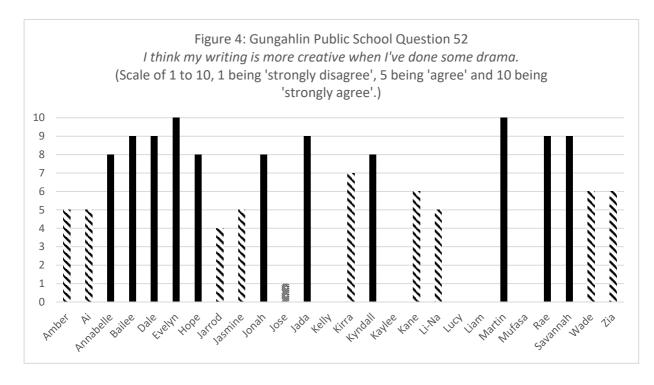(Scale of 1 to 10, 1 being 'strongly disagree', 5 being 'agree' and 10 being 'strongly agree'.)

Students also responded to a statement in the post-programme survey asking if they felt it was easier to write following drama sessions. This is represented in Figure 3 (below).

Figure 3: Gungahlin Public School Question 51
*I find it easier to **write** following Drama sessions.*
(Scale of 1 to 10, 1 being 'strongly disagree', 5 being 'agree' and 10 being 'strongly agree'.)

Responses to Question 51 (Figure 3) were quite different from Question 48 (Figure 2); students were separating "learning" and "writing". This time only six students strongly agreed that writing had become easier following drama, eight students agreed, and seven students strongly disagreed. Although students may have reported that there wasn't a shift in the ease in writing following drama, the quality of the writing was certainly of a higher standard according to the class teacher's assessment of both the pre- and post-benchmarking writing. While some students may not have found the writing easier following drama, this may be explained by the positive shift in the quality of writing. Writing following

drama involves students presenting a more complex and nuanced understanding of the text, characters' context, and inferences from the text.

In contrast, students indicated that they generally felt that their writing was more creative following drama experiences. Question 52 (outlined in Figure 4) asked students to respond to the statement: "I think my writing is more creative when I've done some drama."

Figure 4: Gungahlin Public School Question 52
I think my writing is more creative when I've done some drama.
(Scale of 1 to 10, 1 being 'strongly disagree', 5 being 'agree' and 10 being 'strongly agree'.)

Annabelle reflected on the use of the episodic pre-text model building suspense, which she attributed to increased imagination:

> The feeling of suspense usually brightens someone's imagination, because when you are left on a cliff-hanger, there are so many possibilities, so um, so say you were left on the cliff-hanger of "is the little girl going to fall over" you could … there's the possibility that she's not, the possibility that she is, the possibility that an eagle is going to come and swoop her, so there are always so many possibilities when you are left in suspense. (Focus Group #3. 1/08/2017)

Savannah commented that "being in the character's shoes helps you feel what they feel" when discussing the benefits of the drama intervention on writing. Her comment suggests that engaging students aesthetically and in an embodied manner through drama may also increase their own understanding of writing itself. Such a comment offers insight into how some students perceived the drama intervention as supporting their own literacy development and learning.

Question 42 was a post-programme, open-ended question asking students: "Do you feel doing School Drama has helped you infer and fill in the gaps in the story? Why/why not?" One student (Jarrod) disagreed, responding: "No, because it is drama" (PostPSS). Three students (Jose, Kirra and Amber) were unsure and the remaining 17 students who responded to this question agreed through a range of responses. Emotional connection to character and embodying the role were key themes in response to this question:

> Ai: Yes, because you will be acting out and on the way you can do what your character is going to do.

Annabelle: Yes, it definitely has, knowing how a character feels, what they say, what they used to do in the gaps of the book really helps you understand what they're going through.

Evelyn: I think when you act and go through different parts of the story again. You fill gaps in with your imagination, because you know the characters' personalities and things about them and you can picture what they would do in different parts and gaps of the stories. If there is [sic] missing parts you imagine what they would do in different circumstances.

Li-Na: Yes, because you have the same feeling with the book character when you are learn[ing] drama. (PostPSS)

Others made links to imagination and creativity:

Hope*:* Yes, because my imagination went wild.

Zia*:* YESSSSS. Because it's the answer to creativity. (PostPSS)

And other students made connections to deeper understanding:

Savannah*:* Definitely, because we understand the story more than a normal reader would understand.

Rea*:* Yes, because you get to take in what's going on and reflect. (PostPSS)

In addition, during a focus group, several students made similar comments, particularly regarding the episodic pre-text model being instrumental in shifting their engagement and learning:

Kelly: We really like the book, like when we read one page, we ask you if we can read another page and because we just want to keep reading and going in … (Focus Group #4 28/08/2017)

Kelly suggested that the episodic pre-text model may have impacted on her engagement with the text and the learning experiences. Another student in that same focus group, Jasmine, jumped in as soon as Kelly had finished talking, commenting: "It's an interesting book because each time you teach us we play fun games and do some different stuff … like what's not said" (Focus Group #4 28/08/2017). Here Jasmine is making strong connections between the "fun games" and a "different" way of learning to "what's not said", which is the inferential comprehension of the text. She is also exploring the gaps in the text and the "spaces to play" (Williams, 1987) and "places to play" (Gleeson, 2006).

What is clear from these reflections is that the use of drama-rich pedagogy using process drama-based strategies and conventions can engage students in literacy and learning, and then contribute to their literacy development specifically in the area of inferential comprehension. I argue that the use of the episodic pre-text model with drama-rich pedagogy and quality children's literature are essential in creating a learning space that engages students and develops students' literacy skills.

Discussion

In conversations and interviews with the class teacher during and after the intervention, we discussed his thoughts on the episodic pre-text and using drama in this way. Jacob commented during our mid-programme interview:

I think that the thing that the School Drama programme gives that other things do not, is that it has so many engaging activities that can just … it breaks down the text bit by bit, whereas I think that if we just sort of discussed each bit of the text, the kids would just get bored with it. So I really feel like they've enjoyed predicting what's going to happen. They've … really improved their ability to predict what is going to happen and then they really enjoy the reveal of what actually happens. You know, just bringing the enjoyment out of that is massive. (Interview #1 07/09/2017)

Jacob reported that the episodic pre-text model combined with drama-rich pedagogy was enabling deeper exploration of the text, increased ability to predict and increased enjoyment about engagement in the learning. Jacob explained that he felt that this was because students were able to take on the character.

> Being able to *become* a character in the book and think about their position and what's happening in their lives, now that they've gotten better with doing that, I definitely think they've been able to take on perspectives really well and consider different perspectives. (Interview #1 07/09/2017)

Later in that interview he added:

> Yeah, it just has such a range of activities, such a range of engaging activities that the students just love, that it gives them the chance that they love engaging in every single little part of the book. So it can make something which might seem like a boring part of the book, really exciting and engaging. And yeah, the ability to be moving and be active and to use their bodies. (Interview #1 07/09/2017)

Jacob continued to link the academic and non-academic aspects of the experience. Rather than seeing them as silos, he observed that different aspects of the experience fed other aspects. Jacob noted that he felt it was the active, embodied nature of drama that engaged students and that, because they were embodying the characters, they increased their empathy and connection and understanding of the characters and text as a result. His comments and insights about the powerful role of embodiment and enactment resonate with my own observations and analysis and those of the research literature.

Conclusion

As discussed earlier, an extensive body of research has investigated how aspects of drama-rich pedagogy can improve student literacy. This case study of Gungahlin Public School in Sydney adds to this rich portfolio of research. Students at Gungahlin were mostly from lower-socio-economic-status backgrounds and a significant number were from EAL/D backgrounds. Several identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The benchmarking findings and the students' comments together with the teacher's observations demonstrate that the use of drama-rich pedagogy and the use of the episodic pre-text model had a positive impact on student English and literacy learning throughout a school term. It also provided a beneficial addition to the teacher's repertoire of literacy strategies.

Acknowledgements

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