ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL
Drama-based pedagogy in an inclusive primary school

Kathryn Dawson and Stephanie W. Cawthon

Introduction
Many studies have lauded the benefits of the arts in education, specifically drama-in-education (DIE), as an inclusive pedagogical approach that can improve social-emotional and academic learning for all K-12 students (e.g., Conrad & Asher, 2000; Lee et al., 2020). However, the pedagogical innovation that involves teachers of students with disabilities working in inclusive environments is often omitted from pedagogical innovation efforts and reporting (“VSA Intersections,” 2017). Arts integration initiatives have great potential for increasing the accessibility of learning environments, but this prospect often goes unrealized (Glass et al., 2013). Accessibility, at its core, is about opportunity. For something to be accessible, it needs to be designed so that a diverse group of people can use it as intended and to equitable benefit. Education is a landscape with decades of intentional inequities. While officially sanctioned barriers in schooling may have shifted to implicit obstacles, the question of and search for systemic, sustainable, educational equity for all continues.

The purpose of this chapter is to consider how implicit aspects of inclusion and accessibility in drama-based learning design and practice can be explicitly engaged as tools and methods for whole school transformation. We begin with a conceptual overview of inclusion of students with disabilities in education and DIE and discuss the development of creative body-based learning (CBL), alongside arguments regarding evidence-based approaches to professional learning. We introduce our South Australian primary school site, our partnership history, and the methods/activities used in our research-practice relationship. We then analyze and discuss whole school project outcomes across four themes: (1) a shared understanding of CBL as an inclusive, pedagogical practice; (2) teacher view of and approach to teaching students with disabilities; (3) student engagement in learning; and (4) system understanding of school change and leadership. We end with a discussion of larger project implications regarding inclusion and DIE for future practice and research in related fields.
Conceptual frameworks

Inclusion and drama-in-education

Inclusion, from a special education perspective, broadly references where and with whom students with disabilities learn (Osgood, 2005). Historically, when students with disabilities received any schooling, they typically did so in separate settings, even in separate buildings (Boroson, 2017). This segregation from their typically developing peers extended to the teachers and aides who supported their learning, the curriculum, and how their learning was measured, if at all. The “special” in special education was a double-edged sword; while, on the one hand, many students with disabilities benefited from additional supports, many were often excluded from experiencing innovations in general education (Cawthon, 2008). The impact of this segregation on individuals with disabilities often has life-long implications in terms of employment, independent living, and quality of life.

Many special education policies began to change at the latter end of the last century, with an emphasis on both removing the physical walls between students and raising expectations for what students with disabilities could do. The inclusion movement was one response to this need for educational equity for students with disabilities. While it can be tempting to view inclusion as primarily a placement decision (i.e., where students learn), inclusion practices for each individual student can look very different, as they depend on a broad range of factors. Only an extreme version of inclusion provides students with disabilities with the same content and uses the same pedagogical approach as their peers, without regard for their individual characteristics. On the other hand, the mere use of accommodations or the retrofitting of general education practices, without an eye for how to rethink education models to support both students with and without disabilities, represents only a step towards inclusion, not inclusion itself. In reality, inclusion is both more nuanced and more complex. Inclusion, from the perspective of educational equity, means all students are considered in and integrated into decisions about the design of learning, from a holistic standpoint.

This chapter focuses on inclusion practices as they are implemented within DIE. DIE is innovative in its foundation in drama and its creative approaches to learning and problem-solving. The marriage between accessible, inclusive education for students with disabilities and DIE is long-standing. Accessibility and DIE pedagogy can be understood from a classroom learning perspective (e.g., how does room design ensure that each student experiences a physical space that supports their learning in DIE?) and from a pedagogical standpoint (e.g., how is DIE instruction differentiated and personalized?). Founding DIE UK educator and scholar, Dorothy Heathcote (1978), emphasized the importance of moving from the particular to the universal in the design and facilitation of DIE with individuals with intellectual disabilities:

By its nature [DIE] slows time down, forces attention, and is concretely made manifest at every stage. It is essential in all learning, that we first must be able to deal at the concrete level of ideas before we can develop abstraction skills.

(Heathcote, 1978, p. 152)

Heathcote’s (1978) work argues that effective DIE includes increased opportunities for agency, choice, and decision time. She also argued for a more nuanced understanding of DIE participant outcomes, which could range from “a new eyelid flutter” to “showing opinion and sticking to it” (Heathcote, 1978, p. 154).
The benefits of drama-based learning experiences for all students are well grounded in the connection between kinesthetic learning, creativity, socioemotional development, and cognition (see Anderson, 2012; Bolton & Heathcote, 1995; Dawson & Lee, 2018; Edmiston, 2014; Kempe, 1996; Neelands & Goode, 2000; O’Neill, 1995; Peter, 1995; Sherratt & Peter, 2002; van de Water et al., 2015). Drama work in educational contexts goes by many names, including DIE, applied drama, educational drama, dramatic inquiry, role play, creative drama, and drama-based pedagogy. The above body of research provides evidence that DIE (in all its forms and adaptations) is supportive of inclusive learning environments. For example, the US theater scholar Sally Bailey (2010) explores how drama-based learning experiences explicitly benefit individuals with disabilities across a range of domains, including essential components for learning such as attention, coordination, receptive and expressive language, memory, self-confidence, and executive functioning. Previous research in this area also focuses on a range of learning models from fully integrated to pull out, separate settings (Anderson et al., 2017; Berry, 2015; Peter, 2009; Podlozny, 2000; Smith, 2001). This current chapter adds to this body of literature through an investigation of systemic factors that support drama-based learning for all students with/out disabilities in inclusive school settings.

**Inclusion and creative body-based learning**

In 2016, artists and academics from the United States teamed with colleagues in South Australia to develop and research the impact of CBL in general education. CBL is a multi-arts expansion of drama-based pedagogy (Dawson & Lee, 2018). It was developed specifically to align with South Australia’s “Teaching for Effective Learning” (2016) government education framework. CBL uses an arts-based pedagogical approach to integrate creative processes from drama, visual arts, and dance into general education, in an effort to develop a more culturally responsive, inclusive, and embodied approach to learning (Garett et al., 2018; Meiners et al., 2019).

Despite the literature, most arts-based interventions in inclusive education settings remain limited in scope. For example, many studies have shown that arts-based pedagogies facilitate improved literacy outcomes but are less impactful in other domains, such as STEM fields (Anderson, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Anderson & Berry, 2014, 2015; de la Cruz et al., 1998). What is required to design, implement, and assess “holistic and comprehensive” arts-based interventions in inclusive public school settings, particularly from an educational support and staffing perspective (Anderson et al., 2017, p. 218)? We argue that implementing effective whole school interventions within the lens of an inclusive learning environment requires a transformative professional learning model that includes “a conceptual shifting of the [school] world, a persistent re-imagining of the way that humans relate to each other across differences of corporeal form and function” (Conroy, 2009, p. 2). In sum, we identify a need for research on whole school pedagogical approaches to arts-based professional learning at inclusive school sites.

**Whole school improvement through the arts**

“Educational equity occurs when a school system has created policies, curricula, and a social culture that is representative of all students, such that all students have both encouragement and access to engage in high quality learning experiences” (Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012, para. 2). Inclusive educational sites, if represented at all in educational research, have
often been exploited and silenced in the research process. Additionally, there is a need to move from research on special education to research with special education in an effort to shift problematic colonial histories which exclude participants from key research decisions and contributes to othering and disenfranchising practices (Ajodhia-Andrews, 2016). To effectively design, lead, and assess the impact of whole school professional learning at an inclusive school site, effective school improvement should be built from the needs, experience, and expertise from within and across the school community.

The design of professional learning is a critical part of successful whole school improvement. Effective professional learning engages the attitudes, beliefs, and classroom practices of teachers to improve student learning through pedagogical innovation (Avalos, 2011; Guskey, 1986, 2002; Webster-Wright, 2009). Whole school improvement requires meaningful alignment between students, teachers, and the school (mission, administrative structure, and support systems). Shared intentionality is especially important in inclusive learning settings. Here, teachers need ongoing support from administration to persist in their adoption of the new pedagogy and practice, especially when negotiating complex contextual factors like outside curricular demands, accountability measures, or staffing models at the school site.

Research demonstrates that teachers can respond well to high-quality whole school professional development which integrates the arts into general education (Burnaford, 2009). Additionally, pedagogically focused professional development in the arts, which centers on the kinesthetic, culturally relevant, and dialogic aspects of drama/theatre, has proven to be an effective tool for teaching and learning differentiation (Anderson et al., 2017; Dawson & Lee, 2018). There is power in holistic, arts-based pedagogical professional learning where significant value is placed in the sociocultural context in which the arts are being used, where local and context-sensitive knowledge forms the basis of how impact is determined, qualified, and quantified for others.

The project

The school context

Christie Downs Primary School (CDPS) is a fully inclusive public school site located in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia. CDPS employs Reggio Emilia principles with 200 students from complex backgrounds, including 80 students who have at least one or more verified disabilities. The structure of CDPS allows for flexibility within a single school site which includes two learning groups: the “Main” and the “Unit.” The Main serves students from the Christie Downs’ community, which is described on the school’s website as follows:

The area is predominantly housing trust which caters for emergency housing and the Southern Women’s Shelter. There is a great deal of transience within the community. Students are significantly affected by the degree of unemployment, which is impacting upon the third generation.

("Site Context Statement," 2019)

The Unit serves students in smaller, specially designed classrooms. It draws from and “accepts students from a wide range of educational facilities across southern metropolitan Adelaide” ("Site Context Statement," 2019). A significant upgrade to the school site in 2018 resulted in the construction of eight new classrooms, personal care areas, sensory rooms, and
a natural sanctuary play space for the Unit. There are three sets of play equipment, with one especially designed for wheelchair access. The emphasis is on whole child learning – body, mind, heart, and soul. The school fosters effective partnerships with the local community and works closely with families to promote tolerance, resilience, critical thinking and positivity, responsibility, respectful relationships, and teamwork.

CDPS engagement with and use of CBL has evolved over time based on the desire of the leadership and teaching staff to increase their participation in the program (see Figure 26.1, below). In January 2016, CDPS leadership came on as lead partner in the development of a two-year research-practice partnership led by the University of South Australia (Uni SA) (tertiary sector), the Department for Education and Child Development (public education sector), Carclew (youth arts sector), and the University of Texas at Austin (international partner). During the 2016 school year, four lead teachers from CDPS (two from the Main and two from the Unit) participated in a year-long action-based research project to explore the impact of CBL on student engagement in mathematics learning (see Garrett et al., 2018; Meiners et al., 2019, for further project descriptions and research outcomes). In 2017, CDPS chose to pursue a second year of research and training with Uni SA and employed a part-time artist on staff to lead professional CDPS staff. In 2018, the full CDPS staff created a whole site agreement with a focus on literacy and language development through CBL. They received a grant from the special education department for South Australian public schools and contracted the University of Texas to lead their professional learning and research efforts, with a specific focus on CBL and inclusive learning (Figure 26.1).

**Project methods**

During the 2018 school year, CDPS leadership and staff wrote, adopted, and published on their website a whole school commitment to CBL (see Christie Downs Primary School website). The “CBL Learning Agreement” (2018) states that “CBL engages the whole child in learning” and suggests that “when minds and imaginations are fully engaged, students develop the thinking and communication skills inclusive of the language development needed to innovate,

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<td>• PD in CBL and</td>
<td>• CBL Artist-in-residence 1 day a week</td>
<td>• CBL agreement and staff meetings for Main and Unit</td>
<td>• Research project on literacy and language development</td>
<td>• Intervention training in CBL</td>
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<td>mathematics: 4 teachers for full year</td>
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<td>• PD in CBL and literacy</td>
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<td>• Peer Observations of CBL</td>
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<td>• Action research support</td>
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<td>• PD in CBL 1 day all staff</td>
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*PD = Professional Development

*CBL = Creative Body-based Learning.

**Figure 26.1** Evolution of CBL at Christie Downs Primary School 2016–2018
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create and find unique solutions” (p. 1). Further, it argues that CBL supports students to make more frequent connections between new information and their own experience; the result is a deeper understanding and longer-term memory of the content. CDPS sees CBL as a holistic approach to learning which enables all young people to take risks, to challenge themselves, and to have a strong voice in their learning (“CBL Whole School Agreement,” 2018). Based on this agreement, specific CBL Partnership Goals for 2018 were selected by administration and staff. These included: (1) vocabulary; (2) student-led practice and student voice; (3) CBL as intervention strategy; (4) CBL for students with disabilities; (5) CBL and whole school change; and (6) measurement tools that can be adapted for later use (“CBL Report,” 2019).

The “CBL Learning Agreement” was the starting point for a greater engagement by teachers within the Unit in the CBL project. In previous years, a small team of teachers participated in training and development and implemented CBL consistently within their classrooms. In 2018, all teachers (including all teachers across the Unit plus all on-site student teachers) attended multiple trainings and planned at least one lesson using CBL strategies within their classrooms, with many staff planning multiple sequences of lessons over the year. These lessons covered a large variety of curriculum areas and topics. Teachers were encouraged to adapt the CBL strategies to suit their students in order to ensure all of the students’ learning, communication, and health and well-being needs were met.

Professional Learning Design. The 2018 CBL whole school professional learning project included several types of professional learning activities led by the University of Texas (UT) academics, local South Australian teaching artists, and the University of South Australia Department for Education at various points throughout the year-long period of the project. Training included both large group workshops for the entire staff as well as focused sessions for specialized teams.

Four multi-day residences led by university academics and/or local teaching artists were held across the year. These site visits were scheduled to capitalize on opportunities to provide training and support to teachers; discuss implementation of CBL with small groups of teachers (e.g., intervention team); observe the use of CBL strategies across a range of settings; discuss data collection and emerging themes; and understand the links between CBL and whole school systems change. In between the site visits, The UT team used Skype to engage in distance learning coaching with CDPS teachers and to support logistics for data collection and analysis with CDPS leadership.

During 2018, two CDPS teachers from the Unit, who had been engaged in CBL since 2016, led workshops for teachers on CBL and inclusive learning sponsored by the Department for Education of South Australia; these teachers also led training at their own school site for regional educational guests. CDPS also explored aspects of youth-led CBL facilitation in 2018. With UT support, the year-7 students co-designed multiple literacy-focused role plays, which they facilitated with the year-3/4 and year-5/6 students at CDPS.

Data Collection. Tools to assess our shared work were developed through a collaborative process with administrators and teachers from CDPS. Our goal was to provide meaningful inquiry without overburdening educators with information they could not provide or that required time that was not available. Data collection on the design and facilitation of CBL learning experiences sought to capture both the process of integrating CBL into the school culture and the impact of using CBL on teacher pedagogy and student learning.

The collection of data was an ongoing process, and occurred during each of the site visits as well as remotely by CDPS teachers and staff. Data collection tools included notes from professional learning group discussions, classroom observation notes, learning experience facilitation planning and reflection documents, and teacher and staff interviews. The project
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data set from teachers included a total of 14 lesson plans and reflections, 10 classroom observations, and 9 interview transcripts. Additional notes from CDPS staff meetings, Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings, and academic researcher observations were also reviewed and integrated into this analysis.

Professional Learning Discussion Groups. The teaching and administrative staff at CDPS meet regularly to discuss current issues and areas of focus for their practice. For the most part, the Unit and Main staff meet separately. These meetings provided an opportunity for the project researchers to collect data on teacher perspectives related to the implementation of CBL in their classrooms. Team meeting discussions were audio-recorded and provided to the data team for analysis.

Learning Experience Planning and Reflection Forms. CDPS leadership and project staff co-developed a learning experience planning document and reflection form that aligned with both the public education instructional standards and the project goals. Teachers were encouraged to fill out the front of the document, which focused on planning prior to using the CBL strategy, before delivering the learning experience. Teachers then completed the back of the document, which focused on reflection on their discoveries about teaching efficacy, their students as learners, and CBL as pedagogical practice, after having completed the project.

Classroom Observation Notes. Two whole school CBL classroom observations occurred during the 2018 project. The first set was focused on teacher observation by the research team, with dedicated time afterward to discuss the specific CBL learning experience as well as overall thinking around CBL in their classroom. The second set was focused on teacher-to-teacher observation, using a Department for Education reflection tool, with a small group of CDPS teachers and researchers observing and reflecting together with the teacher. All observation activities were conducted on a volunteer basis.

Key themes and findings

Next, we provide a summary of key themes that arose across this complex and nuanced data set and activities facilitated in 2018.

Theme one: shift in understanding of CBL as an inclusive, pedagogical practice

Building on the momentum generated from the 2016 project, CBL knowledge and practice increased across the school in the areas of learning design, student learning, drama pedagogy, and assessment.

CBL and learning design. Implementing CBL is often a process of trying, learning, revising, and trying again. We found that the participating teachers often revised their work, depending on the learning experience topic and the teacher. Revisions commonly included a boost in the level of challenge (i.e., add more shapes, encourage more independent work), a simplification of tasks (i.e., use fewer numbers, introduce vocabulary earlier), or an increase of modality options (i.e., more sensory aspects, more visual aids), or repetition. Revisions rarely increased abstraction or added perspective-taking.

Teachers’ reflection on learning design emphasized a desire to balance the demand of CBL on students; they either chose a familiar CBL strategy or they used a new CBL approach with a familiar content area. Further, teachers noted the necessity of having an adult model how to participate in the activity before students tried it out on their own. The need
to provide structure and build familiarity with strategies was an important theme across all
teacher reflections.

**CBL and student learning.** In lessons with CBL strategies, students, especially those who
did not typically actively participate in class, showed strong engagement with one another,
new classmates, and the curriculum. Lessons with CBL supported knowledge retention and
transfer across content areas. In lessons with CBL strategies, student voice was encouraged
and amplified. In both formal and informal ways, student leadership and shared power grew
and the power balance in the classroom shifted to one of shared co-construction of knowl-
edge. CBL strategies provided teachers with new information about how their students
learned in ways that had the potential to improve classroom instruction.

**CBL and drama pedagogy.** Although DIE role play examples and learning design were
heavily emphasized, both across the professional learning sequence and during in-class mod-
eling with students, role play sequences were almost entirely absent in the facilitation plans
independently developed by Main and Unit teachers. An analysis of the documented lessons
developed by teachers without outside teaching artist support revealed clearly that teachers
were most able to independently design and lead CBL learning experience sequences which
focused primarily on active game-like strategies or simple body-based representations (like
gestures and tableau) sequenced together. This may be due to the fact that active, body-
based, and theater game strategies offer flexible, productive ways to approach vocabulary
development and are easily tailored to students representing a broad range of cognitive and
physical abilities. When asked about role play, the Main teachers reported feeling less confi-
dent about leading role work sequences on their own without outside artist support. In the
Unit, teachers did not find the abstract “as if” complexity of role play to be productive for
their students.

**CBL and assessment.** In addition to using CBL as an instructional approach, teachers
reported using CBL as a way to assess student knowledge and skills. For example, stu-
dents successfully used their bodies to demonstrate their understanding of 3D shapes. They
demonstrated their understanding of directional language by moving in response to a com-
mand, that is, under the desk, around the chair. Teachers also found success through building
upon embodied response formats to increased moments of verbal responses. Teachers de-
scribed seeing their students in new ways through CBL. One teacher said: “I didn’t know my
students had exposure to this vocabulary until I had done these activities. Now I can build
upon that.” Another noted: “I discovered that one of my kids liked to move, dance. This
information can be used in future lesson planning to improve the match between learning
design and student interests.”

### Theme two: shift in student engagement in learning

The purpose of CBL is not only to provide students with rich ways of learning new material
and of representing their knowledge but also to increase engagement in learning and with
each other. The affective component of CBL is as important as its aesthetic and academic
elements. Overall, teachers reported that their students were very engaged in and enjoyed
the CBL activities: “Students enjoyed participating in these physical, ‘hands-on’, group ori-
entated lessons.” Administration particularly noted that topic-specific terms were embedded
in participating students’ long-term memory through repetitive, physical, and energetic ac-
tivities. Teachers also reported that all students were participating in the lessons, either on
their own or with adult support.
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Many teachers commented that students who normally do not engage with other students or do not engage in activities opted to participate fully when CBL was used in the classroom. For example, students who were in the desensitizing room opted to leave the room and join their classmates when a CBL strategy was led. The Disability Unit Lead administrator corroborated these findings:

Reports from many teachers indicate that a larger proportion of students engaged in CBL strategies throughout the year. A number of students began by observing the lessons and then joining in when it was their turn. Students have become more social in the classes who consistently use CBL strategies both within structured CBL lessons and during other times of the day.

Even when social learning was not the targeted curricular topic, teachers reported that students showed improvement in their ability to take turns, make eye contact, and help and encourage one another during CBL activities. One teacher noted: “Students contributed when I asked questions even though half the class is nonverbal.” Further, students shared power among one another and between students and the teacher. In particular, students expressed their pride (“I am proud!”) in being able to successfully complete the activity together. They were willing to “give it a go” even in new situations that included a certain level of risk-taking and interacting with peers with whom they usually do not engage with.

Theme three: shift in teacher view of and approach to teaching students with disabilities

CBL not only offered students new ways of engaging in the classroom but also provided teachers with a different lens on what students could do as learners. One teacher noted:

Kids were able to join each other’s classrooms with joy (different from past), and there was a shift in teacher’s confidence [which] is what allowed this to happen. The activities may have given them reason to connect with each other and the content in a way that reduced the anxiety of [having] unfamiliar people in the classroom.

A number of teachers were very impressed with how well their students responded to having “strangers” in the classroom, both students from other classrooms and guest teachers. During this time, the teacher observers also noted that students were contributing to the lesson, offering suggestions on what to do and even how to improve it. Additionally, teachers adapted their language and direction based on student responses when using CBL, letting students guide the trajectory of the lesson more so than they might typically do. One participant indicated that “There was the feeling of social cohesion in a classroom that, at times, does not appear to have social cohesion.”

Theme four: system understanding of school change and leadership

Data also revealed the ways systems across the school engaged with, owned, and led various aspects of the CBL project. Peer teaching observations in the CBL project were particularly effective. One teacher said: “I got stuff out of others’ lessons because I had time to sit and reflect on what a new energetic teacher is doing. [Observing] was empowering for me.”
Although most teachers acknowledged the fear or anxiety associated with having a colleague observe them, all teachers commented multiple times about how much they learned both through observing and through receiving feedback. Having had the activity be on a volunteer basis seems to have greatly contributed to the effectiveness of this professional learning opportunity: “We were given a voice in regards to whether we would like to be observed. Added to comfortableness. Good to not have it forced upon us.” Additionally, all teachers identified the value of seeing what colleagues are doing for a better appreciation of and alignment to curriculum across the grade, development level, and campus. One teacher noted: “[Sharing ideas] brought things to life rather than if it was just on a page.” Teachers at CDPS clearly value their role as instructors and seek to improve their own craft, seeing CBL as valuable because: “[CBL] gave permission and gave reasons for us to do what we knew was good teaching.”

From a more holistic perspective, teachers reported growth in their PLCs through the focus on CBL as a pedagogical approach with their students. At the Main and Unit PLCs, teachers often presented their CBL lesson plans, evidence of the lesson (video/audio) and reflections on their lesson. The Main lead noted: “The impact of this process provided professional development opportunities for constructive and critical dialogue between supportive colleagues.” The Disability Unit lead reflected that:

CBL-sharing during PLC time began with experienced CBL teachers sharing the strategies they used with their students and how they adapted them. Over the course of the year, this gave other teachers increased confidence to use the same strategies in their rooms and share their experiences with their colleagues…Over the year as a Leader, I saw an increase in conversations among staff as they have a common language to use when speaking about aspects of their planning and observations. Many teachers were motivated to consistently use CBL strategies as they could see observable differences in their students’ engagement and skill development. Supporting staff to use a common but differentiated approach to teaching through CBL has given me the opportunity to see the benefits of creative movement based teaching methods on both academic and social learning for students.

The Unit Lead administrator’s comments align with labor done by two lead Unit teachers who had been engaged in the CBL project since 2016. Nancy Barclay and Gemma Vowles were given paid time during 2018 to document, synthesize, and offer training to other educators on their adaptation of CBL strategies for special education contexts. Barclay and Vowles wrote a detailed, sequenced numeracy and CBL unit which they had developed and revised with their Unit students between 2016 and 2018. They also selected ten of the CBL (drama-based) strategies that they found most productive for their students and wrote up inclusive facilitation adaptations to share with their peers. These strategies were made into posters which were hung on the walls in the Unit classrooms at CDPS. In this excerpt, Barclay and Vowles reflect on their journey with CBL and inclusive teaching:

Using CBL strategies has been highly successful in our disability unit at Christie Downs Primary School. This is because:

• All students have an opportunity to engage in their own way during a lesson.
• The strategies provide multiple entry points.
• Students show high levels of affective engagement during lessons.
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- The lessons provide opportunities for dialogic meaning-making. This provides opportunities to develop and practice oral language.
- The strategies can be used across all areas of the curriculum.
- Every strategy promotes inclusive learning.

We have found that the CBL strategies also complement the Reggio Emilia principles in viewing children as capable and competent learners and providing them with opportunities to be co-constructors of their own learning. CBL strategies provide a scaffold to social skills, functional language skills, and encouraging creativity. The CBL pedagogy has given teachers at our site another tool to engage our most at-risk learners.  

(“CBL Report,” 2019, p. 16)

We conclude with larger project implications regarding inclusion and DIE for future practice and research in related fields.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

If the main goal for CBL 2018 project was to design equitable professional learning in arts-based pedagogy for every teacher of every student at an inclusive primary school, then the climate of CDPS in 2018 was especially amenable to success. First and foremost, the school had a strong, proactive leadership team aligned in the belief that any school improvement initiative needed to be a whole school approach. Further, leadership used a mission-driven approach to staff development which used consensus-building to drive change from the teachers, not for the teachers. School leaders affirmed their belief in “the use of artistic processes to deepen and enhance learning experiences across the curriculum” and built a whole school site agreement to increase “the quality and quantity of student language development by explicitly teaching vocabulary, speaking and listening skills through the dialogic pedagogy of Creative Body-Based Learning (CBL)” (“CBL Learning Agreement,” 2018, p. 1).

The results of this herculean effort have been significant, in terms of both practice in the school and information that is now available to the field as a whole. More specifically, we now have data that characterize some of the potential impacts of a drama-based approach to learning in the inclusive classroom on teachers and students. Arts-based strategies provided teachers opportunities to design creative, multimodal ways to scaffold and differentiate their instructional practice of domain-specific vocabulary so that students of varying skills and abilities could engage more fully and meaningfully with the material. CBL use increased the quality and quantity of student engagement at CDPS and increased student voice and ownership of learning. Teachers began to see their students as more confident, capable risk-takers willing to explore new forms of intellectual stretch and rigor. Teachers also benefited from a focus on learning design and reflection through the professional learning model; they particularly enjoyed the aspects of peer observation and mentorship. We note that in the Unit there was very limited role play exploration, an area for which CBL draws most heavily on DIE. Future research-practice partnerships would benefit from comprehensive investigation of role play exploration with students with disabilities to better understand barriers and possibilities.

A key element to the success of CBL was certainly the whole school approach to school change. Adding to the complexity of discovering and sharing the story of CBL at CDPS has been the navigation of multiple moving parts (including multiple learning units across the school site; inevitable shifts/changes in teacher employment; and the wide range of learning
differences, abilities, and needs in individual classrooms). The above caveats should not be seen as a limitation of the work done at CDPS in 2018 but as a curricular and methodological foundation that will support expansion of this work. Further research on CBL at CDPS can address applications of the broad range of CBL strategies as well as consider how to comprehensively track impact of CBL across time at the student and/or classroom level.

Data in this chapter were drawn from many sources using a broad array of tools that were designed and adapted to meet the characteristics of this project. Yet, it was an unplanned moment that taught many of us about the true impact and importance of CBL at CDPS. Our University of Texas academic team and CDPS school leader Gail Evans were reviewing the video footage of the Main year-seven students engaging in a CBL lesson with their teacher and a teaching artist. In the footage, all of the students are standing in a circle, interconnected, palm to thumb and thumb to palm. The camera pans across the group as students try to move their thumb away from the person on their left’s palm while simultaneously trying to grab the thumb of the person to their right. Every student in the video is actively engaged; many laugh as they try and mostly fail to grab a thumb and move their thumb. As Gail watched the video, she suddenly gasped and quickly explained that one of the students in the circle had spent the previous morning before filming in a closet they had locked themselves in. The student had threatened to self-harm, professional services had been called, and the staff spent the morning trying to get the student out of the closet and possibly be admitted to an institution for evaluation. Eventually, the student opened the door; they stated that they didn’t want to leave, that they wanted to stay at school. That was yesterday. Today, for the first time in weeks, the same student was not in a closet or even on the side of the classroom. Today, they were standing in a circle, laughing, trying to grab a thumb as part of an opening strategy in a CBL role play. “That’s CBL,” Evans said, tears running down her face as the video concluded. “That’s the difference this work has made in our school...student engagement: learning and schooling has purpose.”

We end this chapter and this project with larger questions for ourselves and for our field. What does it mean to make “a difference” in our students’ lives, especially the lives of those who have traditionally been excluded from pedagogical innovation, including DIE? Measurement questions abound, both in how to define what it means for an arts-based project to have an “impact” on students and schools as well as how to collect that information in a systematic and authentic manner. For complex young people whose rich funds of knowledge are often made invisible by their daily navigations of challenges, it is necessary to engage in a holistic method and a rounded understanding of student outcome improvement. In partnership with CDPS teachers and staff, the data collection team tried and at times struggled to create tools that provided opportunities to show if and where CBL has made a difference in teacher attitudes, beliefs, skills, and knowledge in working with the CDPS student body. For example, how does the project best capture the fact that the choice a student makes to stand in a circle, laugh, and play with their peers may be the significant accomplishment of that week? These are areas of inquiry we invited CDPS to ask and to consider as a learning community. The results from this project were complex and at times messy; these findings may not entirely align with how student and whole school success is measured in most accountability frameworks. The lesson plans developed did not “look” like exemplar DIE work. Yet the CDPS CBL project serves as an important reminder that when young people and teachers have the opportunity to fully engage their minds and imaginations, they begin to develop the thinking and communication skills that are needed to innovate, create, and find unique solutions to make change within their individual learning journeys and lives.
Drama-based pedagogy

Note

1 A teacher who had become most comfortable and confident with role play design from training received across 2016–2018 was on maternity leave during 2018; their absence resulted in a reduction in CBL leadership and experience across the teacher cadre during the 2018 project.

References


