It is clear that the relationships between drama, language, literacy understandings and literacy development are well established over many decades of classroom practice and research. These relationships are relevant and compelling today in a post-normal world (Sardar, 2010). Despite this evidence, a narrow definition of literacy currently dominates literacy pedagogy and curriculum in many Western countries (see, e.g., Mitchell, 2020). There is abundant evidence that drama-rich pedagogy used with quality literary texts has the potential to nurture every aspect of learning to be literate (see, e.g., Baldwin & Fleming, 2003; Cremin, 2014; Dunn & Stinson, 2012; Ewing, 2010b, 2006, 2002; Ewing, Simons et al., 2016; Ewing & Saunders, 2017, 2016; Fiske, 1999; McMaster, 1998; Miller & Saxton, 2016, 2004; O’Mara, 2004; O’Toole & Dunn, 2015; Saunders, 2019, 2015; Winner et al., 2013).

This essay first defines our understanding of key terms: drama-rich pedagogy, literacy, quality literature. The evolution, implementation and research to date about the School Drama programme, an ongoing teacher professional learning programme developed in Australia by Sydney Theatre Company and the University of Sydney. It then provides a rich exemplar of how empathy and compassion, imagination and personal dispositions and capabilities, including collaboration, connection and confidence, noticing and inferring, can be nurtured alongside the development of embodied literacies through the artistic processes and experiences inherent in drama-rich pedagogies and quality literature.

As Miller and Saxton (2016, p. 14) argue, it is ‘through the embodied metaphoric acts of the imagination in drama and theatre’ that ‘we create internal models that result in increased social and empathic awareness’. Drama-rich pedagogies enable children to explore a range of meanings, concepts, cultural assumptions and social dilemmas relating to and surpassing their own issues and their personal behaviour and learning.
Key definitions

Defining drama-rich pedagogy

Drama-rich processes and pedagogies sit within the broader term ‘arts-rich pedagogies’ and can be understood under the umbrella of whole-person learning (Smith, 1994). We have used the term ‘drama-rich pedagogy’ to encompass a range of other frequently used terms, including ‘process drama’ (Haseman, 1991; O’Neill, 1995), ‘creative drama’ (Mages, 2008), ‘relational pedagogy’ (Fraser et al., 2013; Prentki & Stinson, 2016), ‘drama-based processes’ or ‘process-based drama’ (Saunders, 2019) and ‘dramatic inquiry through mantle of the expert’ (Aitken, 2012).

Although there are different emphases implied in the use of each of these terms, each advocates the use of artistic and creative drama processes to deepen and enhance learning experiences and the agency and inquiry of the learner in the classroom scaffolded by the teacher as co-learner and facilitator. A range of strategies adapted from those used in theatre, including sculpture, role walking, role play, depiction, still image or tableau, improvisation, mime, thought tracking or tapping in, hot-seating or questioning in role, play-building, mantle or enactment of the expert, conscience alley and readers’ theatre (Ewing, Simons et al., 2016), help explore a character, issue, dilemma, problem, situation, theme or series of related ideas or themes. The emphasis is always on the rich processes that enable embodiment and enactment (e.g., play, inquiry, imagination, creativity, improvisation, collaboration, substantive dialogic interaction and aesthetic shaping of the body). Winner et al.’s (2013) meta-analysis within theatre and drama education concluded that ‘strong evidence shows that theatre education in the form of enacting stories in the classroom (classroom drama) strengthens verbal skills’ (p. 7).

As Miller and Saxton (2005) remind us, ‘improvisation, perspective taking; working in role (walking in the shoes of another); working symbolically; revisiting and reframing our ideas; asking questions and reflecting – all done as individuals or in groups – are strategies fundamental to drama practice’ (p. 5). Cremin (2014, p. 25) notes, “[T]he 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’. While performances may emerge from the processes, they are not the ultimate aim. Although the focus of this chapter is the use of drama with literature and literacy development, drama-rich pedagogy can and should be used across the curriculum.

Quality literary texts

Dirt Lane Press states on their website (https://www.dirtlanepress.com/about): ‘Literature, like life, leaves its mark on our minds and bodies. The richer the literature, the more profoundly we are affected’. Quality literary texts are artful, intellectually challenging, evocative and usually richly layered because they resonate differently for people at different ages and stages. The author and illustrator use literary and visual devices including symbolism, irony, metaphor and allusion (Lamarque, 2013, p. 524; Gibson & Ewing, 2020). Beneath the surface meanings there are themes that trigger our imaginations, tickle our curiosity, provoke a difficult question, nurture new understandings or interpretations or encourage us to reflect on things we have taken for granted.

Interestingly, a growing body of research demonstrates the benefits arising from reading and reflecting on imaginative literary texts. Kidd and Castano’s (2013) research, for example,
undertook a number of studies that included between 86 and 356 participants in which they asked participants to read genre fiction, literary fiction, non-fiction excerpts or nothing at all. Five questions were asked centred around the human capacity to comprehend that other people hold beliefs and desires and experience emotions that may be different from their own beliefs, desires, feelings and perspectives. Findings confirmed that reading literary fiction improved the reader’s capacity to infer and understand what others are thinking and feeling. Kidd and Castano argued that literary fiction focuses more on the psychology of characters and their relationships, often disrupting reader expectations and stereotypes. In addition, if little detail was provided, readers needed to fill in the gaps to understand the characters’ intentions, motivations and inner conversations.

Also of interest is Maria Nikolajeva’s (2014, p. 10) argument that engagement with fiction is very much anchored in the body. She synthesised neuroscientific and psychological theories with specific and popular literary examples including classics such as Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak, 1963), The Chronicles of Narnia (Lewis, 1950–1956) and His Dark Materials (Pullman, 1995–2000) to demonstrate how reading fiction impacts children’s cognitive and emotional development. She explained that literary texts (including picture books, fantasy, fairy tales and realistic and historical fiction) help children develop their knowledge of self, others and the world more broadly. Most of all she emphasised how such reading fosters empathy and the understanding of different perspectives.

Imaginative texts should therefore be used as the basis for powerful learning experiences integrating drama, music, dance, visual arts and media and often provide the inspiration for creative writing. As discussed in more detail below, many learners benefit from this combination of fictional narrative and learning through embodiment and enactment of the text. Drama can deepen learning in the areas of language and expressive skill development (e.g., Baldwin & Fleming, 2003; Bolton, 1984; Deasy, 2002; Ewing, 2010b; Ewing & Saunders, 2016a; Ewing, Simons et al., 2016; O’Toole & Dunn, 2020; Saunders, 2019; Winner et al., 2013).

Defining literacy

Learning to be literate is a complex and multidimensional meaning-making process that is constantly evolving. Most educators are aware that confidence with oral language underpins becoming literate and that learning to read and write involves the learner coordinating a range of non-visual and visual processes that interact together to make meaning. This has been described by some as ‘multi-tasking’.

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)

While space constraints preclude a discussion of some of the controversies that have surrounded literacy pedagogy over the last century, it is highly pertinent here to note that neuroimaging research increasingly acknowledges that embodied processes play an important role in becoming deeply literate (alongside the more frequently emphasised phonological processing and word reading and semantic comprehension) (Compton-Lilly et al., 2020). For example, Ziegler et al. (2018) have demonstrated that portions of the same primary
emotion network involved in a lived experience are activated while processing emotive text. This acknowledgement of the role of embodiment in developing deep literacies and essential dispositions is discussed in more detail below using the experience of the *School Drama* programme.

**The School Drama programme**

The *School Drama* programme, developed and offered by Sydney Theatre Company (STC) in partnership with the University of Sydney since 2009, is both a co-mentoring teacher professional learning programme and a drama-literature intervention for participant learners. It aims to foster teacher confidence and expertise in the use of drama-rich pedagogy with quality literature to enhance student identity, empathy and engagement as well as deepening their English and literacy skills.

The co-mentoring professional learning model is based on and extends Ewing’s (2002, 2006, 2009) work with classroom teachers over two decades and emphasises the building of a relationship of mutual respect between teachers and teaching artists. It often reawakens the teacher’s artistry and self-efficacy. Co-mentoring requires time for consultation, planning and debriefing around shared purpose and vision alongside the development of collegiality and trust through a genuine team-teaching partnership.

In the classic form of the *School Drama* programme, actors or teaching artists (defined by April in Booth 2003, p.10, as ‘an artist who actively engages learners in consciously developing the aesthetics of their own processes for learning’) work alongside participant primary teachers in their classrooms over seven weeks. They model the use of drama as a powerful medium for exploring quality literature and fostering aspects of literacy development. Thus, alongside the teacher professional learning is a focus on improving one or more areas of learners’ English and literacy learning. *School Drama* particularly emphasises confidence in oracy, inferential comprehension, imaginative writing or vocabulary development. One or more of these are selected by the class teacher (Ewing & Saunders, 2017, 2016a; Ewing, Gibson et al., 2015; Saunders, 2019, 2015), and relevant literary text(s) are chosen. Each week an excerpt or ‘episodic pretext’ (Saunders, 2015) from the text is shared, and a range of drama strategies and devices enable teacher, teaching artist and students to play in the spaces or layers of the text, delving deeply beneath surface and literal understandings.

Teaching artists undertake a week-long professional learning programme each year. Each term, all participant teachers are initially involved in a three-hour professional learning workshop, so they experience the drama strategies and conventions firsthand and reflect on how they apply to language and literacy learning. In addition, principals and executives are encouraged to participate in these initial workshops. At the beginning of the classroom programme, the teaching artist and teacher meet to discuss the focus for the seven-week time frame. The teacher identifies the relevant English or literacy focus using outcomes derived from current syllabus documents, school priorities and an analysis of the children’s needs. The teaching artist and class teacher plan and team teach the seven-week programme. Each weekly session spans 60–90 minutes, and after each session the teacher and teaching artist engage in a short debriefing session.

As mentioned above, an authentic collaboration between the teacher and teaching artist is both critical for and central to enabling and empowering teacher knowledge, understanding and confidence. Working together – learning from each other and sharing new ideas – grows experience and expertise, and professional dialogue nurtures the development of a rich learning community. With such opportunities, teachers can build courage and capacity...
to meaningfully embed drama in both their English and literacy programme and across other subjects in the curriculum, and to articulate these philosophies and processes in their school communities.

The success of careful listening to all stakeholders about the School Drama initiative and yearly evaluation during the four-year pilot programme undertaken from 2009 to 2012 translated to the programme’s ongoing refinement each year. The programme has broadened and is now implemented across Australia in each sector and, more recently, in New Zealand. At the time of writing in the final month of 2020, 35,000 teachers and students had been involved in School Drama.

It has been critical to monitor the effectiveness and sustainability of such professional learning over an extended time frame. A variety of methods have been used to collect data from principals and executive staff, teachers, students and teaching artists to ensure that all participant voices and perspectives are represented. Benchmarking selected students’ capacities in the identified literacy area occurs before and after the programme to assess student starting points and progress over the programme. Teacher pre- and post-programme surveys are administered, and debriefing focus sessions are undertaken with teaching artists at the end of each term. A meta-analysis (Gibson & Smith, 2013) noted that ‘[t]he co-mentoring model of the professional working relationship between teaching artist and teacher is probably the most important and powerful element of the School Drama Program’.

Over the last 12 years, a portfolio of 11 research case studies has documented the impact of School Drama through different lenses, and different perspectives have been explored. For example, Robertson’s (2010) case study looked at learners’ perspectives on School Drama in an inner-city school context; Sze (2013) investigated the importance of school leadership in growing the initiative in a large suburban school with a diverse and increasing English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) population; Saunders (2015) examined School Drama’s impact on student academic and non-academic outcomes in a Year 6 class; Beaumont (2020) and McAtamney (2018) particularly focused on the effectiveness of the drama-rich pedagogy with primary and secondary EALD students, respectively; and Smith (2014) examined the features evident in the sustainability of the School Drama approach in a school over time. Campbell (2018, in press) has particularly explored the School Drama experience from the perspectives of the teaching artists. Hogan (2020) and Campbell and Hogan (2019) have developed the Connected programme, which uses the drama-rich pedagogy with ancient myths and legends for adult refugees and migrants learning English. Other case studies have also applied the model to different contexts: Hankus (2016) looked at using drama-rich pedagogy in secondary history, while Karaolis (2020) explored an adaptation of School Drama in three preschool contexts with a particular focus on puppetry. The programme is also now used in juvenile justice and alternative learning contexts.

It is clear that this programme is an engaging and creative way of developing transformative teacher professional practice as well as deepening learners’ confidence, imagination, collaboration, engagement and empathy alongside English and literacy understandings. Teachers and teaching artists express surprise at how valuable School Drama is for them as well as for their participating students. Teachers certainly value the distinction between building expertise and confidence through co-teaching and learning rather than, as in some artist-in-residence programmes, a programme that solely emphasises learning from an expert (Ewing & Saunders, 2016a). They also note a growth in their own confidence, understanding and expertise in using drama strategies in their programming across the curriculum. They frequently acknowledge a return to, or a reawakening of, their own creative pedagogical processes. The research findings also underline the participant teachers’ excitement with
and enthusiasm for being associated with a working theatre and professional actors alongside their newfound expertise in their use of drama. Where School Drama is most effective is when teachers are able to consolidate their learning between and beyond the teaching artists’ visits, either with their own or another class, as it allows them to embed their newfound confidence and expertise.

Both text (Ewing & Saunders, 2016a) and online resources (Ewing & Saunders, The School Drama Companion, 2016b) have been developed in response to teachers’ enthusiasm to continue using drama-rich pedagogy after their individual mentoring concludes. The School Drama Hub professional learning programme has been created to address the demand from teachers who have been involved in the Classic programme (the seven-week, artist-in-residence model) and want to continue their professional development and involvement in the drama learning community. Attending twilight workshops to learn more, trying their learning out in their specific contexts and reporting back in the next workshop enable a refinement of skills and understandings as well as renewal. New units of work are also jointly written and shared.

The teaching artists value the opportunity to use their professional practice and expertise to work with teachers and learners and report a depth of new learning and understandings (Campbell, 2018, in press; Ewing & Saunders, 2019).

The next section delves more deeply into the features enhanced through the use of drama-rich pedagogy with literature and the role it plays in the development of deep literacies. It focuses on Saunders’s (2019) research and particularly profiles the students’ voices in his study to gain an understanding of what it is about drama-rich pedagogy that they identify as fostering deep literacy learning.

**Drama-rich pedagogy and becoming more deeply literate: learners’ voices**

Saunders’s (2019, p. 92) doctoral research ‘investigated, described, interpreted and explained three School Drama interventions in a multi-site case study’ to identify both unique and common features that emerged during the programme in the three Sydney classrooms, a year 5, a composite 5/6 and a composite 3/4.

- Gungahlin Public School, a small public school in inner-city Sydney, with a high proportion of 18% Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander students and 41% of students from EAL/D background. The literary text used was John Marsden & Matt Ottley’s Home and Away (2008).
- Waratah Grammar School, a non-selective, co-educational, secular, independent school catering for primary (K to Year 6) and secondary (Years 7 to 12) students on the one campus located close to the city’s centre. The City (Greder, 2010) was the main literary focus.
- Wentworth Public School, a public school located in Sydney’s East with 43% of students with an EALD background. Both Tricycle (Amado & Ruano, 2007) and The Island (Greder, 2007) were used for the unit.

Each school reflected diverse educational and socio-economic contexts. The School Drama programme was undertaken in each school during a different school term in 2017, and different literary texts were introduced. Saunders worked as both the teaching artist and researcher in all three contexts. Evidence collected included benchmarking student literacy achievement in inferential comprehension which was the English/literacy focus area in each
context. All students were benchmarked by the classroom teacher before the programme began and after the programme concluded (weeks one and nine of the school term). Students were also involved in a survey (pre- and post-programme) and focus groups during and after the programme. Saunders interviewed the class teachers during the intervention and a year after the programme was completed to explore their perspectives about the students’ experience while in the moment and beyond. Researcher reflections were also recorded in a research journal.

Each case study demonstrates that drama can support those students who find literacy learning difficult as well as high achievers. It can also help reduce the gap between them. In the following sections we have chosen to highlight the students’ experiences and perspectives on why the School Drama programme was important for them. Often the learners themselves are not heard in such research.

**Benchmarking**

Those students needing to improve their inferential comprehension tended to show the most growth in their benchmarking writing-in-role, as Figures 44.1–44.3 indicate. Male students demonstrated more marked gains in their post-programme benchmarking tasks.

Below is a brief analysis pre- and post-writing in role of one student at Wentworth school, JP (Figure 44.3), to illustrate the marked differences that were evident after the drama intervention (Figures 44.4 and 44.5). Aside from the considerable difference in the length (nearly three times longer), the post-task illustrated a deeper connection to the character enriched by a description of the city that included ideas that had formed part of the visualisation undertaken in the final workshop. JP was seeing the city through the eyes of The Boy, who had grown up in an isolated place outside of the city. For example, he described guns as a ‘metal object’ that he didn’t understand, inferring that The Boy had never seen such an object before. The city is also described with a ‘sense of death, hate, destruction, loss, sorrow and anger. This place is terrible, violent, burial, destructive and loathsome’ compared to the place his mother had fled to with him.
At Wentworth Public School, Jasper moved dramatically from a C in his pre-task to A− in his post-task. In analysing his post-benchmarking task it is clear that Jasper’s ability to infer and communicate that inference has developed:

Jasper further develops the character of the fisherman Armin Greder created in *The Island*: ‘I live with a weight on my shoulders, a weight bigger than any other, the weight of a man’s death’. He is capturing the inner thoughts and feelings of the character, demonstrating inference and deep understanding of the character’s thoughts and feelings of guilt (Figures 44.6 and 44.7).

In his post-survey Jasper commented at the end of the programme that he felt doing *School Drama* had helped his English and literacy because it changes the way you think about the book and you get into the character’s shoes. In a focus group when Saunders asked students...
Figure 44.4  JP’s pre-programme benchmarking task (4 May 2017)

Figure 44.5  JP’s post-programme benchmarking task (20 July 2017)

Figure 44.6  Jasper’s pre-programme benchmarking task (16 October 2017)
what stood out to them through the drama, Jasper responded: I really like how it makes your mind think a lot and it makes me enjoy the book ten times more than if I read it in two minutes.

SAUNDERS: Hmm, why is that, do you think?
JASPER: (jumps in) Because it makes me think about all the different possibilities that could happen, and then I wanna see what actually happens.

Alongside the benchmarking, a number of interrelated themes emerged from Saunders’s analysis of the focus groups, as well as surveys and interviews relating to learners’ skills, dispositions and capabilities. Below is a brief snapshot of some of these themes as reflected upon by the learners themselves.

**Imagination**

Vygotsky (1930/2004, p. 35) placed a great deal of emphasis on imagination, asserting that ‘[t]he entire future of humanity will be attained through the creative imagination’. Imagining other possibilities and something of another’s experience means we are not limited by our own lenses and experiences. The participants in all three schools talked about how the drama experiences had activated their imaginations. They likened it to ‘switching their imagination on’:

KIA: Like when I read or draw, my imagination switch flicks on because when I draw I feel like I can draw anything and when you read, you are in the book. You are not just sitting with the book, you are actually in the story. And also with drama your imagination switch goes on and you also feel like you can be anything... become anything... [our emphasis].
GRACE: It’s like you have an imagination switch, and you can turn it on or off. Like normally if you are doing a persuasive text or something like that or you are persuading someone, your imagination turns off. Like completely off. Um but when you are doing drama you get to think and you get to imagine what other people feel like and that clicks on in a way.
Although high-achieving students did not show the same gains in their post-benchmarking gains, they articulated benefits from the drama programme. When asked in a focus group if they thought that the drama work in class had helped in any way, Zara suggested: ‘It lifts up your imagination cos you have to think in your head and then say it. So you can express yourself a little more’. The notion that drama supports imagination was again picked up at the end of that focus group, with Zara adding: ‘I think drama is a pretty good idea for children with less imagination than other people, so it brings up their imagination level, up top... so once you are kind of imaginative, you are never going to stop being imaginative... drama is a pretty good way to let that imagination out and keep growing it’. Later she commented in her post-survey that she felt that School Drama had helped her with her English and literacy ‘because it helps activate your brain’.

It is important then to note that both high-achieving learners and those needing to improve reported that drama activated their imaginations.

**Engagement and embodiment**

Embodiment and enactment, or walking in someone else’s shoes (Ewing, Simons et al., 2016), are at the centre of drama-rich pedagogy, and it follows that they are at the core of becoming critically literate. The experiential and embodied nature of drama parallels Vygotksy’s socio-constructivist notion of perezhivanie, or ‘lived emotional experience’, considered fundamental to meaningful learning (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002).

When Saunders (2019) asked the students to describe the School Drama experience, they overwhelmingly used descriptors like ‘fun’ and/or ‘interesting’ and linked this enjoyment of drama to being active: ‘moving’ and ‘doing’ and embodying the learning which, in turn, linked to their shaping and sharing of their thoughts and ideas through drama.

For example:

CHASE: It’s been fun because you can move around to do everything. You don’t have to just sit there and look down the entire time.
GRACE: Yeah.
JOHN: What’s been fun about it?
GRACE: Well, it’s just like... it’s not like your normal writing sessions where you are just staying still. You sort of move around a lot and get active a lot.
KIA: Well you are learning stuff in a fun way. You’re not just sitting down and working in a work book or something, you are actually getting up and moving.
JOSH: I think drama’s really fun and it’s a much funner way to learn and we get to do better things than we get to do in class.
JOHN: Why do you think it’s fun? What makes it fun?
JOSH: Because... you don’t have to write a lot of things down... you can actually talk and move and act so it’s more interactive and interesting.

Further Charlotte explained in her focus discussion: ‘I think that it’s like no rules and you get to move around and you can learn new things. Like if you do an English lesson you learn things but with no brightness in them, but when we do drama, it’s kind of bright, not dark.’

In a third focus group, Cameron identified ‘movement’ as key to his enjoyment of drama: ‘I’ve enjoyed all the movement. Like I’ve never really thought that I would get to move this much. But I’ve really started to enjoy moving around a lot more.’
As Grace reflected: ‘… I found it easier to learn about literature because we are not just sitting down with a pen and writing. We can bring other people’s thoughts into it or you’re getting pretty much anyone else’s opinion and not just getting your own. So I mean you get to act things out and in your mind so maybe someone else has done something that you didn’t think of. So it’s a great way to do things.’

CHASE: Yeah, it’s harder to think of ideas when you are sitting down. It’s easier to make stories and things in drama.

SAUNDERS: Ok, why do you think that is?

CHASE: Because you are actually moving around with the story.

So the learners clearly articulated a link between actively moving with thinking of new ideas, enjoyment and engaging more fully in the learning process.

**Developing empathy: Connecting to character**

Thinking and feeling as another is not enough; empathy requires that we respond or take some kind of action in our own context where possible. To stand with another – even in fictional circumstances – is to practise compassion (Miller & Saxton, 2016, pp. 15–16). Drama strategies, for example, hot-seating, walking in role, creating freeze frames as characters, role play and other drama strategies, allow learners to explore characters, rehearse potential conversations and interactions and imagine alternative endings. Learners have new insights about different perspectives, and alternative ways of seeing and understanding can emerge (Ewing, 2019).

Saunders (2019) theorises that the engagement and connection with character evolves into empathy through opportunities to embody characters and enact their experiences and dilemmas. Most students in his study reported a stronger connection to the characters explored in the School Drama literary texts compared to reading a book on their own. There were a number of post-intervention survey responses agreeing and strongly agreeing that drama had helped them see the world through the eyes of others and understand different perspectives. There were, however, between one and four students in each case study class who disagreed.

Saunders (2019) theorises that developing an empathetic or emotional connection to a character may provide students with greater levels of comprehension and inferential comprehension about the character and their inner thoughts, motivations and attitudes.

EVELYN: I think you have stronger connections with the characters in drama than just reading them in class because when you are in drama you can act out the characters and demonstrate and imagine what they would do in situations and how. You can be in the characters’ shoes. When you are in class you just read the book and don’t act out the characters.

SANTIAGO: Of course. It was an amazing journey to go through reading these books. I felt what the character felt and went on their journey too.

**Working collaboratively**

Another theme that emerged strongly for learners across all three case studies was the merit of working in collaboration with others because they felt it triggered their own ideas to develop further.
REESE: … I think it’s more engaging and everyone has a go and you get to work with different people that you haven’t worked with before and yeah, it’s very interesting.
SAUNDERS: And what makes it engaging do you think?
REESE: Probably cos not just talking to one person or something, the making sure that everyone is included and it makes it fun for everyone.
LIAM: Well I didn’t like working in groups before, like a lone wolf, but through the drama it makes it fun.
AMBER: I made more acquaintances… I’ve made more friends and it brings the class together more.

The students have expressed important realisations about enjoying and appreciating the value of working collaboratively across friendship groups instead of working individually. They also understand that everyone needs to be included to ensure a cohesive classroom.

**Developing confidence**

Analysis of the data that explored student confidence through focus group responses, teacher interviews and survey responses suggests that case study students and their teachers have generally observed that the *School Drama* experience helped improve student confidence:

TABATHA: Ah, you’ve helped us, like everyone I think, a lot with their confidence and how everyone thinks outside the box now – they think like, you’ve expanded their knowledge.
CASSANDRA: Because I feel more confident. And I feel like I can show everyone what my imaginations are and what my emotions are.

**Noticing and developing inference**

In all three case studies, Saunders (2019) tracked the shifts in inferential comprehension as a prominent outcome of the drama-literature unit. He noted these shifts through the analysis of student benchmarking tasks, teacher observations and teaching artist/researcher journal notes. The majority of students reported in the survey and focus groups that they believed the drama had had a positive impact on their literacy skills in the area of inference and comprehension. For example, they talked about deeper noticing and comprehension in a number of focus groups. Tabatha spoke about a particular illustration in *Tricycle* (Amado & Ruano, 2007):

TABATHA: I think, if we didn’t have you here, we probably wouldn’t have interpreted things, like the way you do. You know, with the hand, I would have never noticed it, until like the hundredth time I’d read it. Or like with this one, there’s all little meanings that you bring up and it brings us a new topic which is really fun and yeah, it’s really fun.
XENA: It’s like, when you like normally miss whatever happened on the page or don’t understand a sentence or something, even though it’s like you understand and you can kind of like forget to understand or recognise the story. And it just really helps you understand it. You don’t want to be stuck on a page and going ‘what does that mean?’ Yeah!
KATHERINE: Yes, because in drama I have learnt to always look for the little details because all of them could become lots of bigger ones which will make the story even better.
LIBBY: Yes, because I now see it in different ways.
RENEE: Yes. It made me realise the purpose of a book and I love all the ambiguity within all the pictures.

And comments in the post-survey supported this sense of noticing and inferring:

SANTIAGO: Reading a story is one thing, but going through what that character feels like is another thing, and I think that these drama lessons helped support this fact.

TABATHA: Yes, because in drama we did fill in the gaps.

The class teachers also made important observations about how they perceived the drama-rich pedagogy developed their learners’ understandings more quickly:

Teacher at Waratah Grammar School:… like overall, like outstandingly they went beyond what they previously did. So pretty impressive really. Some of the writing that I was reading, I was quite blown away by some of the stuff. It was really quite insightful and the descriptive language and… It was really quite cool.

Teacher at Gungahlin Public School: It [drama] just gives them such an empathy towards the characters and they can understand a lot more how they feel. So I’m not shocked by the growth during drama, but it is definitely more significant than I would normally expect.

Teacher at Wentworth Public School: I think it moves it much faster. I think with writing it can take time for them to find their own style. But with drama it’s immediate. Because you make those inferences in it, when you say or think about how your character would feel or something. And there is no right or wrong […] so I think it’s an immediacy that normally writing, you have to put more effort over time, as the teacher, and you will get sublime writing, but it’s over time. But with drama, I do think it’s far more effective and it’s far quicker, and I’m not surprised that you can see that lift so quickly.

Literacy and drama are both meaning-making activities, and the use of emotion is central to understanding meanings, particularly with a focus of developing comprehension and inference as a literacy focus.

**Concluding comments**

The evidence from programmes such as *School Drama* strongly suggests that drama processes can deepen teacher learning and help transform traditional classroom pedagogy across the curriculum. In addition, drama can effect change in social behaviours, because it provides opportunities for learners to explore multiple perspectives and work through real issues and dilemmas. Built on interactive collaborative experiences coupled with reflection, drama-rich pedagogies and quality literature enable us to create shared meanings and understandings and imagine new ways of being in and understanding others and the world.

Perhaps one of the most important findings from the 11 years of *School Drama* is, however, the recognition of the intertwining of teacher, artist and student well-being through co-learning leading to a growth in confidence and self-efficacy, empathy and compassion and a newfound appreciation of the need to engage imagination and creativity in learning in developing a deep understanding of what it means to be literate in today’s world.

*School Drama* provides opportunities, time and strategies to activate imaginations, embody feelings and enact new experiences by encouraging learners to delve deeply into texts,
Drama-rich pedagogy, literature, literacy

beyond the surface level, to learn about themselves and others in the context of the complexities of today’s world and develop the confidence to ask ‘what if’? Drama-rich pedagogies used to interrogate quality literary texts enable multiple ways of knowing, doing, being and becoming and the exploration of alternative possibilities and realities in a world sorely in need of new understandings.

References


Miller, C., & Saxton, J. (2005). Drama: alive and well; A pedagogy of practice, of research and of teacher education [Conference presentation]. Canadian Teacher Education Conference, Calgary, Canada.


