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MEI LING, MARY, AND MICHAELA

Mapping drama teaching journeys

Michaela Jack and Mary Jackson

This is the story of three journeys: all three tell of courage, initiative, and resilience. It is a story of a girl’s courage in a far-off time; of two teachers’ practice in these times; of storying that experience for the future.

Once, a long time ago, there was a girl called Mei Ling who lived in a village in China, beneath a mountain. The village lived in fear of a roaring dragon they believed lived on the mountain, and that the rocks and fire hurled down at them by the dragon were the cause of the drought and the ruin of their small farms. Mei Ling’s birthday was coming, and for her party she was allowed to invite whoever she wanted. She was a friendly and courageous girl, and she was determined to venture up the mountain. Imagine you were in a Year 3 class hearing that story – can you guess who it was she wanted to invite to her party? And if you heard her plan, what would you say?

Once not so long ago there was a teacher called Mary who stuck a couple of googly eyeballs on a sock to make a puppet dragon who would meet her Year 3 class when they had made their way up the stony, rocky, dangerous mountain to the cave to confront that scary dragon. An eyeball fell off the sock – but it didn’t matter. By then, they believed.

Once quite recently there was another teacher, Michaela. It was her first time in a Year 2 classroom, and the children were returning to school after long weeks of lockdown. Her mentor teacher and the whole staff had been asked to attend sensitively to the children’s well-being. Michaela remembered the Mei Ling story from her teacher education course in drama, and, thinking of the values of courage and confidence at its heart, she offered to teach it. The class she had been placed with had never done drama and neither had her mentor teacher, and Michaela herself admitted being petrified. She had no idea what would happen when she went into role as an old person who had lived in the village a long time, to answer the children’s questions about tales of the dragon. She pulled a black scarf over her head and sat hunched over. They were entranced.

Once Michaela got going, “it just rolled along” despite the “wriggly worms” in that junior class. Mary too found that the children she had thought would not participate were enthusiastic. Both young teachers, both trying their first experience at teaching drama, neither having a mentor teacher who knew drama well – and both were delighted with how it went. Both classes talked about the stories and the drama for several weeks.

This description of practice is an account of how two pre-service student teachers had the initiative and the courage to try teaching some drama for the first time during their
practicum (classroom) placements and who achieved successful and rewarding learning and teaching experiences. I refer to them in this account as teachers, and indeed they deserve that title given the skill they brought to their practice.

This piece of writing records a reflective discussion on their drama work, which took place some months after they had been in the classroom. The collegial three-way conversation was sparked by the student teachers’ delighted emails sent to me reporting their success and was accomplished when all three of us had the opportunity to come together to talk. I had been the drama lecturer who had modelled the story in the drama course taken as part of their initial teacher education. I have found that that story, with its use of teacher-in-role and the puppet, has been a useful way of modelling and teaching about strategies that appeal to younger children. The two teachers had been in different courses, but I documented the sessions with a step-by-step outline of the shifts between the stages of the drama, and had included on the documents a sidebar with a set of “teaching tips” pointing out organisational strategies or theoretical explanations. This is my practice and is intended to be a record of teaching process should any student want to use the story in their own teaching.

When the chance appeared to try some drama, both Michaela and Mary decided that the Mei Ling story was right for their classes and needs, and they had gone to the documented accounts. Each of them had contacted me describing their situations and asking for any extra advice. Hearing later their delight at their achievements, I hoped that if there ever was a chance for collective reflection, a discussion could be a step in their professional learning. Converted to publication, I hope that it will be an encouragement for them and other student teachers to pursue other scholarly writing, and that it will show some pointers to guide educators towards helping novice teachers of drama to put into practice this valuable teaching pedagogy which is still not widely seen and practised in classrooms.

This then is a story of celebration and an account of what we might learn from the two teachers’ experience. Although in their pressured lives as pre-service teachers they are required to reflect on and interrogate their practice regularly, this was a chance to do it together, to share expert and novice points of view, and to uncover and name glimpses of teaching and learning. In co-constructing findings from shared experience, we explored and modelled partnering in research. For teacher education, I wanted to capture the student voice in an early drama teaching venture and evaluate the efficacy of what had been taught. Their story matters because listening to their accounts can help us hear about facing the hurdle of drama teaching and what lessons can be learned.

Drama is frequently suggested as a pedagogical approach for supporting a variety of subject areas, or for addressing needs that arise in a classroom — encouraging relationships or getting to know each other. Yet while it is accepted as being a valuable means of integrating learning, not many teachers have embedded drama into their classroom practice — neither of the student teachers in this story was working with a mentor teacher who had done any drama.

Mary’s classroom situation was that once she got to know her Year 3 class, she just knew the story would suit their needs, and she was determined to try it. She had been “interested in the performing arts”, but until she took drama as part of her initial teacher education programme she had not realised how it worked for learning, how effective it could be in engaging learners, and how so many other areas of the curriculum could be woven alongside the drama.

The immediate circumstances of Michaela’s teaching were that she was in her graduate teaching course in 2020 and her placement for classroom experience was interrupted by six weeks of lockdown. When the Year 2 class returned to school, the teaching staff resolved to ensure that their classroom programmes would all teach for the well-being and to help
children readjust. Michaela recognised that the Mei Ling story in drama held the potential for a shared learning experience that would emphasise relationships through a story that would explore feelings of courage, confidence, and companionship. She was determined to have a go.

**The story of the drama: getting started**

You worry about ‘what if’ – but most of the time it doesn’t even come up.

*(Mary)*

The ones you didn’t think would participate did.

*(Michaela)*

Both teachers admitted getting to know the steps thoroughly – but then they found that once they got going they did not need to refer to notes. Michaela reported that that even though at the beginning it had felt like having to perform, in fact all she was doing was participating.

Michaela had grabbed the chance to do drama, despite her nervousness. She knew the story would fit with the well-being theme and had the capacity to boost children’s confidence and self-reliance. Michaela recognised that it was a chance to get to know the children, and she had an instinct that it would help re-integrate them after weeks of not being in their class group. Michaela prepared carefully: she found some pictures of padi fields, wrote herself notes, and rehearsed her storytelling with ritual beginning and endings: “Once upon a time… and that’s the end of the story”. She still started with the fluttering doubt that this could totally flop….

**Challenges and surprises**

*I didn’t think they’d buy into it – but they did.*

*(Michaela)*

*Oh, I forgot to say – do you remember where our village was and what it was like?*

*(Mary)*

Once it got going, though, it just rolled along (Michaela). In the original tale Mei Ling goes up the mountain alone; but designing the drama with young children in mind, new challenges and pauses to explore the context were added, and Mei Ling’s friends accompany her on the expedition. The plan for the drama involved telling the story and breaking it up with frequent use of movement – for example, an early break in the story was used to talk about the village and their small gardens, getting children to suggest what plants might be grown and how the people would work in a garden weeding or picking … show me how they’d plant their carrots….

Belief in the traditional setting was built slowly with these activities as well as reacting when the dragon’s roar suddenly bellowed out over the countryside. Telling a story appeals to young children and enables the teacher to use eyes, voice, and gesture in real time in response to the children sitting in front of them, speed up or add detail, and gently manage the tension.

Curiosity about the dragon was fostered by meeting the teacher-in-role as an old person in the village, to encourage the children to ask more about this fearful threat to the village. Michaela was challenged by the step into teacher-in-role but found it far easier than she had
anticipated. Stooped over and with a black scarf draped over her head, she found that *the children loved me being someone else*. An old person’s stance of strait-laced opposition to the young people daring to go with Mei Ling on the expedition and a bemused vagueness about any real details about the creature of course just boosted their keenness to set off with Mei Ling.

Mary’s challenge appeared as the class, enlisted as Mei Ling’s friends, began to prepare for the expedition. This is the moment for the teacher to move around and talk with children as they mime packing their bags – water, extra clothing, sunscreen. Mary was somewhat startled to find one child energetically stuffing a grenade launcher into his backpack. Easy to see where the idea came from, given exposure to movies and TV, but certainly this was the point at which Mary’s thinking on her feet was tested. Quick intuition prevailed:

> Oh, I forgot to say… do you remember where our village was – about how we said that was a really, really long time ago and I don’t think they had those things then – but for sure you might need something to defend yourself in a dangerous situation….

(Mary)

... an imagined heavy stick seemed to satisfy.

### Meeting the dragon

*I thought – they know how it ends – but they were shifting the story, they were rewriting it and making it theirs.*

(Mary)

In one traditional version of the story, Mei Ling meets the dragon: the dragon is amazed at her courage in coming up the mountain and reveals that he is alone in his cave (and has been for thousands of years) and that his roaring is simply an expression of loneliness. The invitation to the birthday is accepted and Mei Ling is carried down the mountain. Wherever the dragon’s tail strikes the ground, a stream rises so that the village will no longer be arid and waterless.

Mary was surprised that her class shifted the ending. They sat confronting the dragon puppet (eyeballs replaced) and asked him why he threw fire, why he roared so terrifyingly. They asked about crimes the dragon had been blamed for (or the rumours of vague misdeeds fed into their doubts by the old person back in the village). Now, hearing the dragon himself deny those events and explain his loneliness, they sprang to his defence, sympathetic now on his behalf and sure that he had been blamed wrongly. From her place manipulating her puppet, Mary felt the mood shift from hostility towards a menacing dragon to friendship for a sad individual. She was surprised at the rewriting of the story and realised that her class was working together to construct an ending that satisfied them. And on the spot there, from the distance of her puppet, she appreciated the value of being in role –

> I realised my role was not to give them any answers but to reflect it back to them so they could change.

The friendship was revealed in real form in letters to the dragon written later –

*You can be our friend – we’ll play with you and you can take us for rides.*

What was even more surprising to both teachers was the response from their mentor teachers. Michaela’s mentor, who had admitted openly that she had not taught drama because it seemed too hard, was quickly impressed at the way the children were engaged, and she went on to seek extra help and resources that might work from an itinerant teacher who came into
the school for arts subjects. Mary’s mentor was especially pleased at the letters the children wrote to the dragon, and she was keen to see other drama work included in the programme.

In the classroom, for Michaela, drama became “my thing”. After that first week back at school after long weeks of lockdown, and after that first drama teaching episode, she felt the children soon became more relaxed in their classroom environment, mixed comfortably, and readily accepted her presence. Building on the drama work, Michaela went on to experiment with using the same techniques on the spot with other picture books. Where she had planned simply to read aloud, she quickly found the children were keen to take part and try out what the people in the illustrations were doing, or to pretend to be the characters and answer questions, and they eagerly tried out voices and movements with her puppets. Their participation was unexpected and rewarding. Previously Michaela had characterised herself as a reserved person but discovered that teaching through drama you don’t have to be out there – you’re not asking them to be on show – you’re just participating.

**Theorising the teachers’ stories: dispositions, resilience, relationships**

The context for this article was a shared reflective conversation which looked back at successful teaching episodes, in a situation which enabled the two participants to prompt each other’s recollections and focus their recall through the informed questions of the third-party interviewer. They were both at the time pre-service students in initial teacher education, and the theorising will be framed by research into initial teacher education and early career experiences and how these might support and sustain teachers. In their initial teacher education, both teachers were familiar with frequent and searching reflective tasks and were used to the inquiry-focused view of effective teaching that underpins the teaching-as-inquiry model central to New Zealand’s curriculum. There is, however, not much research carried out into drama teaching in classrooms. When this opportunity presented itself it was clear that my areas of research – teacher education and drama education – could come together purposefully and that, though the scale was small, adopting a teaching inquiry approach as recommended in the New Zealand Curriculum might provide useful recommendations. I have been enlightened by framing my research through the lens of resilience. Resilience in the context of teacher education where supporting and sustaining teachers in early career has been a well-researched theme, and more specifically in the era of the pandemic, the precise classroom context for one of the teachers interviewed. Broadly then, this article conforms to a reflection on practice undertaken in a collegial setting to record, inquire into, and reflect on findings about teaching and learning.

Early-years teachers find it challenging to step their novice teaching towards effective expertise, and Le Cornu (2013, 2016) has researched and written much about resilience in relation to strengthening teachers in the first years of their careers. Her long-term and large-scale research looks at the wider school landscape and supports learning communities and professional learning. This is undoubtedly now a proven approach, yet the much smaller example of practice that is reported here indicates support for some of Le Cornu’s wider findings on a more specific scale.

Le Cornu (2013) drew on Jordan’s model of relational resilience and looked at what sustained a new teacher in the first years. Relationships with students, with teaching colleagues, and with leaders were all cited, and in the experience looked at here, relationships with colleagues and fellow teachers are noteworthy. Both teachers were rewarded by the responses from their students. Michaela received encouragement and immediate feedback from her mentor, who was motivated to find other drama resources to use for herself, and Mary’s mentor teacher was impressed at the class’s responses and supported her to extend the Mei...
Ling story into a dragon dance session, puppet making, and writing. Both teachers built on success and found ways of adapting strategies for new teaching content.

After the event, the engagement in the reciprocal reflective discussion recorded here was beneficial: their experiences were confirmed and validated, and this piece of writing further fixes the experience as reality, to encourage their further professional scholarship. The sharing – hearing of similar teaching circumstances – let them see their experience in a strong light that will sustain their confidence and support the growth of their identities as teachers.

**Dispositions for teaching drama**

The dispositions of each teacher did play a part in their readiness, willingness, and ability to take on something new, and this has much to do with the question of teaching style. The two teachers wondered initially about whether the drama story would work and were aware of their own style. They both realised later that working in drama was not as scary as they may have thought. Mary saw that I don’t have to be ra-ra – I just have to enable and encourage, and Michaela too looked back and realised that you don’t have to be out there... and you’re not asking them to be on show – they’re just participating.

The teaching-as-inquiry model for the way that teachers pursue an inquiry-focused study of effective teaching is central to New Zealand’s curriculum. Our collegial inquiry brought our three views together. After sharing stories, we identified some of the theoretical drama explanations already mentioned in previous sections – reflections about seeing the co-construction of the story and observations of the stages of building belief. We thought back to teacher-in-role, the steps, the challenges, and the learning rewards for the children. Acknowledging context, the personal qualities that both teachers possessed were natural assets that they brought to working in drama with young children. Teaching style in this case did play a part. Mary and Michaela are natural storytellers, responsive to children, and they get obvious enjoyment from being with children.

Both teachers demonstrated attitudes that contributed to success and enabled their achievement. They were open-minded and willing to consider a teaching approach that was unfamiliar – I thought OK, I’ll give it a go (Michaela). They accepted that things might go wrong but were prepared to persist – and found you’re scared of what they might do – but most of the time it doesn’t come up (Mary). Both showed persistence in adapting and integrating the strategies in the following days into other teaching episodes (Mary into dance, and Michaela into shared reading), thus reinforcing their capacity for responsive teaching. Both were positive and responsive to the children and had the belief and confidence that it would work. They demonstrated affective qualities (humour, passion) that convinced them that using drama was something they wanted to do, and they showed thinking dispositions (curiosity, creativity) that enabled them to make good teaching work. They also had a body of knowledge about drama education and how a drama session could be structured. This arose in part from having experienced the same work themselves and having taken part in the Mei Ling drama as participants. It is likely too that the drama they had experienced had been taught in a way that matched their style and hooked their interest. Dispositional affordances clearly suited them both to taking on the challenge, but the practical elements that made drama teaching accessible are also part of Michaela’s and Mary’s journeys.

**Stories of resilience and relationships**

Their practice indicates that both teachers operated with a committed relational pedagogy. Aitken et al. (2007) acknowledges that much of what has been written about relational pedagogy has not
necessarily been written for drama but acquires “a particular resonance when manifested in drama teaching” (p. 2). Relational pedagogy often refers to the shared human space, the presence of emotion, and the teachers’ care for enthusing the participants and encouraging them to empathise.

Connecting the ideas to drama, Aitken et al. (2007) write that this style of teaching includes in part an appreciation of and sensitivity to the power relationship that exists between teachers and children in the real and in the fictional world of drama. Despite brief experience, both teachers intuitively discerned and navigated that tension effectively and positively. In Mary’s case, because belief had been built in “olden days” place, the challenge of the grenade launcher could be calmly and smoothly negotiated. Interestingly too, both teachers had selective mute children in their classes who were very mindful of the group activities, easing into the choice of a buddy slowly and gently. Mary was delighted that later the child was able to willingly show a dance move to the dragon at the mouth of the cave. Such on-the-spot negotiation of terms and sensitivity to pace illustrates that teacher-in-role state, when the playing alongside unsettles the accustomed power relationship. Mary and Michaela both sensed it in the moment of being in role.

Both teachers selected material of significance. They wanted their students to learn about courage, confidence, and well-being, and in Michaela’s case this had been an expressed objective for the classroom programme. These stories took place in 2020 when our educational attention turned swiftly to how our children would cope with the challenges we all confronted facing isolation and anxiety about our future, and they recognised the story of Mei Ling had potential for teaching courage, confidence, resilience, and resourcefulness. In New Zealand, the resource www.teritotoi.org was created by the University of Auckland specifically to help teachers work with children when they first returned to school following major life-changing events. The staff at Michaela’s placement school engaged with the resource to try and develop a school-wide approach to resilience and well-being.

An Australian review of literature available to schools to aid them to promote well-being and resilience in children (Cahill et al., 2014) describes resilience as “the ability to cope or bounce back after encountering negative events, difficult situations, challenges or adversity and to return to almost the same level of emotional wellbeing” (p. 14).

The review covers a vast range of research studies that have investigated and supported the importance of pedagogical and relational strategies to foster skills of self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness, the building blocks of resilience. Research findings point to positive teacher–student relationships, the interconnectedness, and the dynamic nature of the teaching and learning environment that teachers need to provide in order to support outcomes for children that reflect well-being and the ability to rebound. The drama work described in the stories of these two teachers fostered problem-solving skills and encouraged children to interact well with others (Michaela’s mentor noticed that even the children she had least expected to participate had beaming smiles). The children, it would seem, developed a sense of purpose and optimism as expressed in the letters written after the drama work in Mary’s class, and social competence was shown by the child who agreed to replace the anachronistic grenade launcher with a stick. Resilience for children!

**Theorising the practice of drama education in classrooms and in teacher education**

This last section shifts now to my opportunity to reflect on the journeys and the stories as a teacher educator. There are two particular features that emerge from the teachers’ stories that connect to my own interests in observing drama teaching practice and studying initial
teacher education. I have always believed in the power of experiential education and in the potential that a strong drama education experience has for capturing student teachers’ interest and increasing the likelihood that they will take drama into their own practice. I have become convinced too that making the teaching explicit is vital: documenting and supplying annotated accounts of the drama sequences that I teach is one practical way to support the student teachers to take drama into their practice. In our discussion, Michaela and Mary both recalled participating in several sessions other than the Mei Ling story, dramas that had been similarly annotated and which had explored multiple perspectives on stories. The documents and having participated built their body of drama knowledge.

To the practicalities of making drama work first. Miller and Saxton’s work bears out the point about making the work explicit. In the introduction of their book *Into the Story: Language in Action through Drama* (2004), Miller and Saxton write about how they came to develop structures and scripts for their students and teachers, and how successful that proved. Reactions to the approach, however, differed. For inexperienced and generalist teachers, they found that their scripts gave them confidence, but they also acknowledged that experienced drama teachers considered that the method denied them the opportunity for creativity and for responding to individuals.

However, in initial teacher education, I am dealing with novices: I want them to teach drama, and I have to make it explicit. By annotating the process in detail, my description of the Mei Ling drama was to an extent prescriptive, and both the teachers who used it said that they had followed steps carefully. My intention, along with Miller and Saxton, is to scaffold novice teachers into using drama with a design that is likely to succeed.

When teachers are new to drama it holds risk, as the mentor teachers had readily acknowledged. Both teachers used a prearranged sequence, yet were on the spot in the real time of the drama and were able to improvise and maintain enough distance from the ‘activity’ of the drama to see with teacher eyes what was happening and then respond to it in the moment. Mary dealt with a grenade launcher calmly, and Michaela could enjoy and make use of a child’s thrill at the expedition up the mountain – *Look out Miss – He’s coming behind us*…? As Miller and Saxton (2004) explain, and those examples show, though the structure is tight for the teacher, it is open for the students and opens the space for them to be co-creators, and there could be no prescription of children’s responses. For the teachers, once at ease with the overall structure and the steps, they were able to modify and adapt to new settings and contexts, stepping beyond the novice.

On the power of a drama experience, I have long been convinced that drama education – especially drama education in a teacher’s initial education into teaching – has strong potential for transformation. Drama education has at its core embodied, transformational, aesthetic, and situated ways of knowing and engages in possibility thinking. Through a well-taught experiential course which capitalises on these approaches, a preparation in drama education can help teachers to tolerate uncertainty, teach creatively, and be open and flexible to experience, willing to take risks and able to think and work collaboratively. Such preparation may be invaluable in preparing them for uncertain, changing times. The Mei Ling story served that purpose in the uncertain times of 2020.

This account of teachers’ experiences through a research-informed interview indeed extends the direction of my research into pre-service teacher perceptions and experiences. In 2016–2020, I set up a longitudinal study to collect responses from pre-service teachers over four iterations of one drama course, an elective course for final-year students. The study began from my (informed by experience) hunch that if pre-service teachers’ experience of drama was strong and memorable, it would be more likely to be retained and to transform
their approach to pedagogy and teaching. The data from that study, Teacher Education Pedagogy: Exploring the Role of Arts in Teacher Transformation, were presented within the faculty at a research seminar featuring alternative methods of representation (Anderson et al., 2019). Data became script, assembled from words taken from the transcriptions, and thus spoken dialogue in the nature of verbatim theatre. Exploration and representation of the voice of participants has risen to the surface of both the longer study and this research-informed discussion, enabling the participants to step into their own research. A short extract from the dialogue assembled from the study was spoken at the seminar by two students and conveys the sense of the transformational learning gained from a drama experience:

But don’t you think sometimes – that drama isn’t the actual activities we do but rather the connections you get to make while doing drama? It brings people out of their shells and allows people do some things that they never thought they could do.

Mary’s and Michaela’s words spoken after teaching drama in a classroom echo some of the same feelings that had been reshaped into the dialogue from the study responses. Both pieces of research lean towards narrative research and reinforce the value of experiential learning. Both pieces of research have also opened the way for presenting and claiming validity for voices and stories.

The stories we drama teachers search for are those that have real and moving connections to lives, and I believe in stories and how important stories can be in the learning-to-teach process. Michaela’s and Mary’s stories show how they have become stronger teachers, how they challenged preconceptions and how they developed their own grounded and experienced base for teaching. The work they did was real and based in the interaction between self and others. They helped their children convert a world that had scariness and threat, into a world that valued relationship and connection.

In reflection, we tried to see a larger meaning for their work – teaching work with significance. We have mapped their stories in reflection, and the map will continue to guide them and others in similar journeys. As teachers, we, all three, hope that by framing the journey as a story we make our data open and accessible and reduce the scale of direction to something that is accessible, shared, and rewarding journey.

References