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“I Felt That I Could Be Whatever I Wanted”: Pre-Service Drama Teachers’ Prior Experiences and Beliefs about Teaching Drama

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Abstract

Pre-service drama teachers enter teacher training with established ideas and beliefs about teaching. These beliefs, based on experience, are informed by many hours spent in schools, and the pedagogies – both effective and ineffective – utilised by their teachers. This research explores the influence of some of these prior experiences on pre-service drama teachers’ beliefs about teaching drama, this being important in the way that not only shapes their practicum experiences, but also what will then influence their own teaching of drama. Individual interviews with four pre-service drama teachers revealed the complexity and dynamics of these

participants' lived experience with narrative portraits constructed as part of the process of inquiry. This process not only built on the ways that knowledge is constructed, and the beliefs and values that underscore these, but also how these are shared and made known. Three key beliefs emerged. First, drama both provides and creates a sense of belonging: belonging being key for students and integral to the work of drama teachers. Second, drama education can promote self-discovery and personal development, having therefore the potential to transform lives. Third, effective drama teachers are valued as hardworking, highly skilled professionals dedicated to bringing out their students' potential. This paper emphasises the importance for pre-service drama teachers to be aware of how their beliefs and subjectivities both influence their own experiences, and consequently have influence over the ways they work with students in the drama space.

Introduction

My solace at school was drama. Thank God for drama! It was the best period of the day. Hanging out with my fellow drama mates was just so easy. Unlike my peer group friends, everyone in drama got on like a house on fire. Actually, it reminds me of the year 11 class I taught when I was on prac [practicum]. All those kids were from different social groups but when they were all together in drama, they had so much fun. This is what drama was like for me at school and I want to recreate this for my future students. (Cindy, pre-service drama teacher).

In the process of learning to teach, pre-service teachers already possess many powerful beliefs about teaching; as they process new teacher knowledge, they combine these beliefs with their pre-existing personal knowledge (Olsen, 2008). Furthermore, research confirms that pre-service teachers' beliefs and ideas about teaching are informed by prior experiences of school (Cheng, Cheng & Tang, 2010; Isikoglu, Basturk & Karaca, 2009; Mansour, 2009; Ng, Nicholas & Williams, 2010; Swainston & Jeanneret, 2013) that surface when they start teaching (Lortie, 1975; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). In this way, the pre-service teacher can be regarded as accruing knowledge like a palimpsest, always writing over what has come before.

In order to better understand this process and its potential to influence what pre-service teachers both do and take with them, this research investigates four pre-service drama teachers' experiences of drama in school, and the influence of these experiences on their subjectivities and beliefs about teaching. The participants' reflections focused particularly on their experiences of curricular drama in secondary school (grades 7-12), their drama teachers, and a range of non-curricular drama activities. These reflections were developed into narrative

portraits (Smyth & McInerney, 2013) to provide a rich understanding of how participants' experience may be seen to influence their subjectivities and beliefs about teaching drama. Through this process, this research responds to recommendations made by Schonmann and Kempe (2010) who urged those working with pre-service drama teachers to listen to the voices and stories of these nascent teachers.

This task is a familiar one for drama teachers; stories are a natural and effective way of providing the context, structure, meaning and overall understanding of complex topic areas, and also of their relations to other knowledge and experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Effective drama pedagogy purposefully involves the shaping, crafting, and performance of story. Furthermore, since stories create meaning both in and through the telling, the richness of stories relayed by the participants in this study allows insight into the complexity of layers that construct their beliefs about teaching drama.

It is critically important for teacher educators to understand what pre-service drama teachers believe when entering the profession, and how these beliefs can be transformed into the pedagogy required to deliver engaging and effective drama experiences. It is equally important for pre-service drama teachers to understand how their own subjectivities can influence their students. As Wales (2009) poignantly states: "Only by comprehending how their [drama teachers] personal, social and political beliefs enter their classrooms can they begin to recognise how their work can concurrently educate and inhibit, free and constrict, empower and disempower their students" (p. 277).

Key Concepts and the Conceptual Terrain

Drama as Art Form and Drama as Process

Drama has existed in different forms throughout the ages, in every known society and for a variety of different purposes such as religious worship, celebration and entertainment. Haseman and O'Toole (1986) stated, "wherever there are people, there is drama" (p. 1). Amplifying the importance of diversity, Ewing (2010) more recently emphasised the central role drama plays in the "identities and cultural practices of all indigenous peoples" (p. 1). Learning through dramatic play has been recognised as vital to a child's development, and Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) proposed play as a means by which children learn to make sense of their environment, both physical and social. Through play, children learn to problem solve and gain control of complex issues which affect their lives (Piaget, 1962). While Piaget emphasised the need for children to explore and experiment for themselves, Vygotsky emphasised the role of social context in play, the construction of knowledge and language development. These early ideas or theories about play have shaped contemporary approaches to drama in education in significant ways. For example, Poston-Anderson (2008) notes the

way that drama has the potential to captivate learners because it builds on the spontaneity and make-believe action of dramatic play.

Practitioners and researchers have provided various definitions of drama including “enactment” and the ways it is both “embodied” and “cognitive” (Pascoe & Pascoe, 2014). Neelands and Dobson (2000) used the metaphor of “drama as an umbrella”, which covers all the processes associated with the making, performing and responding to performance. Bolton (1979) claimed simply that “drama is doing”. Ozbek (2014) proposed that the essence of drama is “make-believe play, in which the participant pretends that he or she is someone else, or something else, through role playing in an imaginary environment” (p. 47). Of concern to those learning the art and craft of drama teaching, is that by trying to reduce “drama” to a definition, one risks missing the complexities, intertextualities, and value of drama.

It is important to note that in an Australian context, “theatre” and “drama” are understood to be two different, but related, concepts. In its simplest terms, drama is process-orientated and does not focus primarily on a performance or a product for its outcome; by contrast, theatre can be thought of as product: a rehearsed and polished performance of sorts, with the primary goal of a theatre event or other form of presentation to an audience. The two are interrelated and as Pascoe and Pascoe (2014) explain, in this context theatre is a subset of drama: “drama draws on elements of play; it is also an example of performance, a broad category of activity where artistic works are presented to audiences” (p. 26). Grady (1996) states that the process of drama “combines kinaesthetic, emotional and intellectual involvements in improvisational activities to promote a range of experiences. This process orientated nature implies that it is non-exhibitional and is done for the benefit of the participants rather than for an audience” (Grady, 1996, p.60).

Participation in dramatic activities contributes to personal development and self-actualisation (Taylor, 1992). Ewing (2010) argues that learning in drama can improve a student’s sense of enjoyment, purpose and identity, and can positively change the direction of a student’s life. Such research clearly establishes the benefits of including drama in the education of young people.

Drama in Schools

Somers (1995) suggests that drama education is one of the most thrilling parts of school life, a notion shared by many drama teachers and students of drama. There is variation in the ways that drama is taught in Australian schools. Some schools offer drama as a discrete subject with a progression of learning over the years. Some schools deliver drama as an extra, non-curricular activity that is not part of the regular school curriculum. Others integrate dramatic

techniques such as improvisation or creative visualisation into different subject areas, and in this case, “drama is not simply a subject, but also a method... a learning tool... [and] a key way in which children gain an understanding of themselves and others” (Neelands, 1992, p. 3). While the integration of dramatic techniques can be an effective means to transform learning and engage students (Ewing, 2010), Pascoe (2002) cautioned that this approach can be a “threat to the integrity of drama as a subject in its own right” (p. 83). The present research focuses on drama as a discrete curricular subject and as a non-curricular activity in secondary schools.

Beliefs about Teaching and Orientations of Drama Teachers

Beliefs are the basic structures that guide our thoughts, actions, preferences, perceptions, decisions, and judgments (Cunningham, Schreiber & Moss, 2005). Terms used to describe teacher beliefs throughout the literature include “teaching conceptions”, “teaching values”, “teaching images”, “teaching perspectives” and “teaching approaches”. Since the present study investigates how past experience influences beliefs about teaching drama, the term “beliefs about teaching” has been employed, as it may encompass the ideas and preconceptions about teaching that pre-service teachers bring with them to their journey of becoming a teacher.

Lortie’s (1975) sociological study, *Schoolteacher*, investigates teachers’ socialisation process into the teaching profession, revealing that one of the major limitations for teachers’ professional socialisation was their experience in formal schooling as a student. Lortie describes these experiences as the “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975, p. 6). Researchers since have repeatedly found strong relationships between teachers’ educational beliefs and their actions in classroom practice (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Slater & Nelson, 2013; Smith & Shepherd, 1988; Westwood, Knight & Redden, 2005). Furthermore, the literature affirms that teachers’ conceptions of teaching and learning are affected by their beliefs, which stem from their own educational experiences (Chan & Elliot, 2004; Decker & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; K. Johnson, 1999; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Woodford, 2002).

Teachers orient themselves toward subject matter based on their beliefs and ideas about which subject matter is important to teach (Grossman, Wilson & Shulman, 1989). For example, orientations towards drama teaching determine to a large extent which topics and texts are taught, which processes will be used, and how work will be assessed (Schiro, 2012). Some teachers might believe learning about the dramatic form is the most important focus in teaching drama, whereas other teachers might rather prioritise personal development. Way (1967) suggests that drama teachers should be “concerned with the development of people,

not with the development of drama” (p. 2). In this sense, drama teachers may prioritise the value of drama in building students’ self-confidence or the social merits of drama and its ability to improve a student’s capacity to work effectively in a group. Bolton (1985) recognised that while these perceptions are valid, he favoured the view of J. Norman, who claims that the core concept of drama in education is “making personal meaning and sense of universal, abstract, social, moral, and ethical concepts through the concrete experience of the drama” (Bolton, 1985, p. 155). Furthermore, Bolton (1985) cautioned that drama teachers who only focused on training their students to be performers underestimated the capacity for important learning to take place.

Neelands and Goode (2000) recognised that drama in schools is used for a wide range of purposes with both long- and short-term educational objectives. These include: (a) instrumental objectives; (b) expressive objectives; (c) aesthetic learning; and, (d) personal and social learning. This work helps to clarify a drama teacher’s orientations towards teaching drama. For example, the drama teacher who sees his or her role as mainly teaching students about the art form, is orientated towards drama for “aesthetic learning” whereas the teacher who focuses more on building students’ self-confidence and ability to work as part of a team, is orientated more to drama for “personal and social learning”. Of course, a drama teacher may orient learning toward more than just one focus, depending on the age of his or her students, their skill level, school/community context, conditions of employment and curriculum requirements (Johnson, 2002).

Expanding on beliefs and orientations towards teaching, Schiro (2012) identified four ideological conceptions of teaching: (a) scholar academic, (b) social efficiency, (c) learner-centred, and (d) social reconstruction. In terms of drama teaching, the first conception, “scholar academic”, would entail a drama teacher viewing his or her dominant responsibility as imparting knowledge to students. This drama teacher has a deep understanding of the discipline and endeavours for students to acquire knowledge and appreciation of theatre and drama practice. The second conception, “social efficiency”, entails a drama teacher viewing the role of schooling, and therefore drama classes, to equip students with the values and skills to become functioning and productive members of society, whereas, “learner-centred” involves a drama teacher personalising the learning program in order to meet the needs of the students themselves. The learner-centered drama teacher strives to maintain a flexible, adaptive learning environment so that students are supported and empowered to navigate problems and experience success (Schiro, 2012). In other words, learning is socially mediated and focuses on students building positive capacities to realise personal goals (Wright, 2007). The fourth conception, “social reconstruction”, entails a drama teacher challenging prevailing social values that disadvantage society. This drama teacher constructs learning whereby the

students are empowered to confront and challenge disadvantage and thereby affect change.

Clearly, personal style and orientation are powerful influences on the work a teacher decides to do in the drama space. This is recognised by Errington who states:

As a teacher, I will select particular kinds of drama if they agree with my beliefs about teaching and education. Providing the drama can be used to put my educational beliefs into practice, I will use it” (1992, p. 1).

Teaching then, can be seen to be subjective and personally situated. Research conducted by Wales (2006, 2009) into the subjectivities of female drama teachers and the influence on their teaching practices is highly relevant to the present study. To begin with, the findings reveal that for some of the participants, their commitment to making a difference was a motivating reason for becoming a drama teacher. Secondly, participants had some collective subjectivities as to important aspects of teaching drama. Wales explained, “They [drama teachers] regarded the value and practice of dramatic form, storytelling, inclusiveness, engagement and collaborative processes as important” (2009, p. 275). However, while the participants were conscious of some of their subjectivities, they did not all contemplate how their beliefs impacted on their students. Furthermore, the influence of past experience on orientations to drama teaching was also shown to be significant (Wales, 2009). For example, one participant revealed her sense of social justice, with her drama teaching encompassing aspects of voice and social justice such as encouraging students to “have their day in the sun” (Wales, 2009, p. 274). Another participant described moments of isolation and being “on the outer” (p. 272) when she was a student at school. Wales summarised this participant’s experience:

She confessed that since she has a tendency to never assume she is part of a group, always supposing she is on the outer, it is no accident that much of her work is based around the notion of bringing people together and “the round table” is a symbol of her working practices. (2009, p. 272)

The focus for this drama teacher in creating a sense of belonging for students in her drama classes is recognised by drama teachers as integral to the work of drama education. Developing social relationships and supportive communities creates a safe and trusting environment for students to explore their creativity and take risks. Haseman and O’Toole explain:

Drama works best when all members of a group trust each other and feel at ease

together. Then everyone will be prepared to listen, to speak out, and to offer and accept criticism of ideas and work. Giving criticism without putting others down, and accepting criticism without becoming upset, are essential for effective group work. All members should be unafraid to express opinions, but at the same time be sensitive to the others in the group. (1986, p. 2)

Furthermore, drama teachers play a key role in fostering belongingness for students. McKean (2002) argues, “Belonging and community occurs when teachers purposely set it out as one of the many learning goals” (p. 27). Wales (2009) highlights the propensity for drama teachers to engage with and include students, particularly those who may be vulnerable and isolated, through carefully organised groupings. Creating a positive dynamic within the drama class is complex, as it takes time and requires the participants to trust and respect each other’s physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being (Nicholson, 2002).

Pertinent to the present study is the work of McKean (2002), who highlighted that the theatre space was recognised by both faculty members and drama students as the most comfortable place in a large and overwhelming school. He recalls:

I saw some students like Michelle, who at the beginning of the drama/theatre experience were not doing well in school, had a hard time following through on projects and seemed to feel isolated from the usual school and out-of-school activities. And for some of these students, theatre proved to be a place where they could develop that sense of belonging and individual identity. (2002, p. 25)

Kempe (2012) provides interesting insights into how pre-service drama teachers identified their role as a drama teacher: some 41% of participants described themselves as “teachers whose art is drama”, 36% described themselves as “teachers whose art is teaching drama”, while 23% saw themselves as “dramatic artists who taught” (p. 530). Furthermore, the participants were of the belief that drama teachers needed to be able to model particular skills and techniques for their students and therefore regarded performance as an essential component of teaching drama.

The relationship between performing and teaching features in earlier research such as that of Whatman (1996), who investigated the different roles that performing arts pre-service teachers adopted and how they were able to internalise and manage the role of the teacher. Whatman (1996) claims that in pre-service education courses, pre-service teachers experienced different teacher roles both at university and during the teaching practicum, leading to the development of a personal philosophy of teaching. Whatman (1996) suggested that pre-service teachers

with experience in performance will readily adapt to various teaching roles due to their prior experiences of role-taking and reflection.

Regardless of whether a drama teacher believes performance is integral to their work in the classroom, a drama teacher, like all teachers, has the capacity to impose their own thoughts, feelings, and ideas (Wales, 2009). This was similarly noted by O'Toole (2004), who cautioned against the propensity for drama teachers to push their own beliefs on students. While the subjectivities revealed in the research of Wales (2009) might seem positive and harmless, the author questions how teachers decide what is positive, asking: "How do we know our own values are the right ones? Are we teaching our values or allowing students to consider and determine their own?" (2009, p. 276).

While research specifically into the beliefs of pre-service drama teachers is limited, Kempe's (2012) research is significant to this study. Kempe (2012) conducted an investigation into the sort of pre-service teachers who were attracted to becoming drama teachers, what they brought with them to the profession and what influenced their career choice. Data was generated through a questionnaire with 104 participants. Some 95% of the participants stated that they became conscious of their aptitude and affinity for drama before the age of 16; of these, 86% responded that this had been recognised by others. Further, the research revealed that while family members had been supportive of the participant's involvement and interest in drama, it was ultimately their drama teacher who had the most influence on the development of their commitment to the subject.

While most of the participants in Kempe's (2012) study decided to choose drama teaching as a profession during their drama studies at university, only around 20% had any industry experience prior to embarking on pre-service education. This implies that participants were more inclined to learn about their discipline before training as a drama teacher or beginning in the industry (Kempe, 2012). Kempe suggests that the participants had come to drama teaching as a conscious decision to work with young people and engage in a discipline they were passionate about rather than because they had not made it as an actor or industry professional.

Clearly, there is evidence in the research to show that drama teachers have beliefs about teaching that are shaped well before and during pre-service education and that influence their orientations in the classroom.

Methodology and Methods

This research focuses on participants' experiences of drama when they were students in secondary school. In order to learn about these experiences, individual interviews were

conducted with participants to hear their stories and perspectives. In order to reflect the rich, story-like aspects of recalled experience, information elicited from these interviews was used to create individual portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997); these portraits are meant to communicate valuable insight into participants' feelings towards school and drama. Further, these portraits enable a construction of knowledge about the influence of drama experience on participants' beliefs and ideas about teaching.

Procedure

Four pre-service drama teachers in their final year of study at a Western Australian university participated in this research. These participants were part of a larger cohort involved with investigating the practicum experiences of pre-service drama teachers (Gray, 2016).

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each participant to capture their prior experiences and feelings about drama when they were students at school. As part of the process of inquiry, participants were asked to describe their recollections in detail and thus were given guiding questions two weeks prior to assist in thinking about key concepts when recounting their experiences (Lichtman, 2009). The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analysed following the protocols highlighted by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014). Portraits were constructed from the data using first person voice and omitting the questions (Smyth & McInerney, 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). To minimise the chance of misinterpretation, portraits were emailed to participants, who were invited to make changes if ideas were incorrectly presented. None of the participants made changes to the portraits.

Constructing Portraits

In constructing portraits, researchers were guided by the expertise of Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), who first formulated portraiture methodology and later developed it with psychologist Jessica Hoffman Davis (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In highlighting the purpose behind portraiture methodology, Gaztambide-Fernandez, Cairns, Kawashima, Menna, and VanderDussen (2011) explained "like most qualitative methodologies, the purpose is to explore participants' experiences and the complexities of how meanings are produced within a particular context" (p. 4). Furthermore, portraiture methodology aims to capture and express the complexity and dynamics of lived experience through artistic lenses. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explained that by blending various art forms with the rigour of science, portraitists are able to "document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place" (p. 13).

A defining feature of portraiture methodology is the researcher's search for goodness (Dixson,

Chapman & Hill, 2005): that is, a search for strengths and possibilities as opposed to deficiencies. This meant that locating moments of resistance and negotiation that would ultimately lead to success were important, rather than the task of locating and documenting failures or shortcomings. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) highlighting that this “is an intentionally generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections” (p. 9). This notion has been a key consideration in constructing portraits of the participants in this study, for example, while individual portraits reveal the vulnerabilities participants experienced during their years at school, they also reveal moments of resilience and the ways in which challenges were approached and handled (Chapman, 2005).

Results

Narrative Portraits

The following portraits introduce the participants and provide an insight into their experiences of drama. Each portrait is followed with a summary encapsulating the influence of drama on participants’ personal and professional lives.

Portrait 1 – Simone: Drama and a Place to Belong

“Drama provided a place to belong; within a school that didn’t want me.”

Even though school was a very lonely place for me, I loved my drama classes. Drama provided a place to belong within a school that didn’t want me. Drama was a class that I was passionate about and loved doing. The best aspect was being able to explore different elements of myself and of theatre. I loved the class – it was my favourite subject. I studied Drama in upper school, too; it was a relief to do something that I loved. I remember creating a 10-minute solo performance, which was just the best experience. I loved the creative process, from researching to performing. I was lucky to have my drama classes to keep me sane amidst all the bullying and hardship I was facing at school. I had some really inspirational teachers. My drama teacher was amazing. She was approachable, welcoming, supportive and could see strengths in her students that we didn’t know we had. She made us feel part of something special. She knew what she was teaching and had an obvious love of it. She worked really hard to ensure we had school productions as they weren’t something the school really promoted. In fact, when I think about the kind of drama teacher I would like to be, it’s just like her: open, enthusiastic, energetic and inspiring. I want to be there for all students and not just the ones with talent.

While the importance of belonging is shared by other participants, it is in Simone's story, as she describes the sense of belonging she found in drama, that it resonates most strongly. While Simone disliked school in general, she recalled drama very differently and stated, "I loved the class. It was my favourite subject." Simone described herself as being passionate about drama, seeing it as a way to express herself while learning about an art form she was highly interested in. It is evident that Simone felt safe in her drama classes, which became a haven for her amidst all the bullying and isolation she experienced in the school yard. Furthermore, Simone viewed her drama teacher as playing an integral role in creating this sense of belonging for Simone and her peers. It is apparent that Simone flourished in this welcoming and safe environment and, understandably, developed a deep respect for her drama teacher, who became an inspiration to her.

Portrait 2 – Claire: Drama and Developing Self-Confidence

"I absolutely loved being in drama and felt that I could be whatever I wanted."

I decided to try a drama class in year eight, partly because my parents thought it might be good for me because I was so painfully shy. I was keen to try it too, because I'd heard some other students talk about it and I wanted to see what it was all about. At first, I was a bit apprehensive. But after a couple of lessons, I knew that it was something I wanted to be a part of. Unlike other subjects, I loved the freedom we had in drama and the fun activities our teacher would do with us. I loved improvising different scenarios and playing funny characters. I absolutely loved doing drama and felt that I could be whatever I wanted. I would do things in my drama classes that I wouldn't have the guts to do in my other classes. Drama provided me with an escape from reality and I made really strong friendships. In fact, I didn't feel the same kind of social pressure with my drama friends as I did with my other friends.

Studying drama also allowed me to be involved in school productions, which was a fantastic experience and really helped my confidence grow. My first drama teacher encouraged me to audition for the school musical and I somehow managed to get the lead role. Since that moment, I have been addicted to being on stage and just wanted more! I never dreamed I would be able to do this. I loved working in a team with a whole lot of people I had things in common with. I loved doing something that could be enjoyed by others. I also enjoyed having the chance to perform and show my skills. My parents would come to all the shows and were so proud of me. Mum told me once that she would never have had the

guts to perform on stage. I remember feeling really chuffed and proud of myself.

Claire experienced personal growth and improved self-confidence through engaging in drama activities. Indeed, it is likely that Claire's parents were familiar with the potential for drama to improve self-confidence, as they encouraged their "painfully shy" daughter to enrol in drama classes at school. This became a turning point for Claire as she found a sense of belonging in her drama class where she was able to be herself and enjoy the freedom to work creatively. She found drama classes offered her a place to escape reality, namely the pressure from her social group. Claire distinguished drama education from her other subjects, recognising its capacity to be fun and enable freedom, which she highly valued. It was evident that Claire's drama classes provided her with an avenue for personal growth and was a place where, without knowing, her sense of self and confidence grew.

Additionally, Claire loved being involved in school productions and recognised that these experiences were instrumental in further developing her self-confidence. Encouraged by her drama teacher and supported by a community of like-minded peers, Claire was able to perform on stage. She described becoming "addicted to being on stage", perhaps from the adrenalin rush of performing in front of an audience combined with the positive attention she received from her family and friends. It is likely that prior to studying drama education, Claire would not have had the confidence to perform on stage.

Portrait 3 – Cindy: Drama and a Community of Like-minded People

"Hanging out with my fellow drama mates was just so easy."

My solace at school was drama. Thank God for drama! It was the best period of the day. Hanging out with my fellow drama mates was just so easy. Unlike my peer group friends, everyone in drama got on like a house on fire. Actually, it reminds me of the year 11 class I taught when I was on prac [practicum]. All those kids were from different social groups but when they were all together in drama, they had so much fun. This is what drama was like for me at school and I want to recreate this for my future students. I guess the drama space was safe and fun. In drama, we were encouraged to support each other rather than to criticise or judge. In drama, we were open and happy to share our ideas and experiences. It was a safe environment to be myself. This was quite different to what happened out in the school yard; no wonder I gravitated to the drama room so much.

I mostly had really good drama teachers at school. Looking back, I think I had

greater expectations of my drama teacher than any of my other teachers. Drama was my favourite subject and I expected my drama teacher to deliver! I remember a relief teacher we had in lower school, for a whole term, who was really unprofessional. She would turn the lights off in the theatre and let us play blind chase for a whole lesson. I remember thinking it was fun but then, deep down, I knew she was irresponsible and a lazy teacher. In fact, she was more interested in being a friend to the kids than a teacher. Luckily she only lasted a term, which made way for my next drama teacher, who was just amazing. She created a great balance between theory and practice. She made everything so interesting and always had us on our feet, putting words into action. She created a little community for us where we felt safe and able to take risks. She's made a real impact on the sort of drama teacher I want to be.

Our school had a tradition of doing a big production each year. I remember watching the production with my parents one year and, at the end of the show, declaring that I would audition for the next one. That show had made a huge impact on me and I knew it was something I wanted to be involved in. All the students looked like they were having so much fun on stage. I had seen them rehearsing after school and walking around wearing their production t-shirts. True to my word, I auditioned the following year and managed to gain a part. Well that was it – hook, line and sinker. I went back for more each year and even scored some lead roles. It was so much fun to be on stage and have my family and friends watching me. I loved being a part of the production community and surrounded with like-minded people. The teachers worked hard to create that team feeling, like organising a special production t-shirt and photo. Those experiences made a huge impact on me both at the time and now as I learn to teach drama.

Cindy's story highlights the strong sense of community and like-minded people she worked with in her drama classes. The sense of camaraderie Cindy enjoyed enabled her to feel safe and able to take risks. Furthermore, Cindy believed her drama teacher fostered this community spirit by encouraging the students to support each other rather than to criticise or judge. Cindy, who lacked a sense of belonging with her peer group, thrived in the drama room surrounded by a community of peers who shared her enthusiasm for drama. While the notion of safety is described in all the participants' recollections of drama, Cindy described an atmosphere which was friendly, supportive and a place where they could take risks without the threat of ridicule. Cindy also believed her drama teacher was integral in creating this safety by instilling a "non-judgmental zone" where students were comfortable to share their ideas and experiences.

Additionally, Cindy enjoyed the community aspects of being involved in the school productions; particularly the opportunity to work with like-minded peers. She was aware of the role her teachers played in fostering the sense of community amongst students. Ewing (2010) noted that participation in the Arts has the propensity to generate “a more developed sense of, or involvement in, community, working in partnership with other organisations for the community, feeling more positive or safer about where they live, pride in own culture or ethnicity” (p. 49). It is evident that Cindy’s school experiences of drama made a significant impact on how she would like to facilitate her drama classes, particularly the sense of community and camaraderie amongst students. This is particularly evident in the parallels she draws between her own experiences of drama as a student at school, and that of the students she taught during a teaching practicum.

Portrait 4 – Kyle: Drama and the Opportunity for Mastery

“It felt so good to be receiving accolades for a change.”

My favourite teacher was my drama teacher, because she treated students with respect and made me feel good about myself. She definitely contributed to my confidence improving. She was really encouraging and made me feel worthy. She would remind us to treat people like we wanted to be treated ourselves, which understandably made an impact on me. I also enjoyed the fact that drama classes were predominantly practical and didn’t contain a lot of writing. This meant that I could throw myself into my work and not have to cover it up. Unlike my other subjects, I didn’t muck around in my drama classes. I think this was because I really liked my teacher and mostly because I was actually really good at it. It’s important to do things you’re good at.

I tried a few different activities outside of school, such as footy, karate and boxing, but nothing really stuck and I was never motivated enough to go consistently. I’d skip training or not bother to turn up for games if I didn’t feel like it. That was my attitude in general really. However, that all changed when I scored a role in the school production! I went from not caring, to not wanting to miss a minute of rehearsals. I don’t really know why. Maybe it was because I was doing something I felt good at.

I remember being involved in a production of “Cosi” where I played the role of Zac, an inmate from a mental asylum who was a dangerous pyromaniac. He was also a misfit, a loner and a really sad character. For some reason, I felt some kind

of connection to him and wanted to do more than play this character for laughs. I saw Zac as a real person, one with a sad story behind him, which had made him into the person he now was. I put a lot of work into developing his character and took my role very seriously. My hard work paid off and I gained amazing feedback from my teachers and friends when they saw me play Zac. It felt so good to be receiving accolades for a change.

I also loved the fact that production work was practical and didn't have any written assessment afterwards. I think doing production work actually made me a better drama student as it helped me make connections between the theory and the practice. This is what I want to do for my students. I remember creating amazing sets when I was at school doing drama. One time we filled the drama room with white sand when we produced *Away* and another time we built a forest with a huge water feature for *The Golden Age*. We'd all chip in five dollars and work until one o'clock in the morning creating the set. We loved building it together. In fact, during ATP [final practicum] I thought a lot about those times. I really want to do this sort of thing with my students, so that they, too, experience the joys of building a set and working on a project together.

Thanks to my drama classes, school productions and some teachers who believed in me, I made it through school.

Kyle's story relates the opportunity drama provided him to recognise his strengths and the impact of his drama teacher, who he felt treated him respectfully and encouraged him to reach his potential. Furthermore, Kyle found the drama space to be "safe", in that it was predominantly practical work. Consequently, Kyle did not need to misbehave in his drama classes as he was not only able to do the work, but was able to do it very well. Ewing (2010) described the belief in the power of arts-based activities for "generating participant engagement, re-locating individual identities and restoring self-esteem..." (p. 49). It is evident that when Kyle realised he had the ability to succeed in drama, his self-belief and confidence grew, which provided him with more positive experiences to focus on at school.

While Kyle tried a number of activities outside of school, he admitted that he wasn't particularly interested or committed to them. However, a turning point came when he gained a role in the school production which, like his drama classes, provided him an avenue to excel. It is evident that his interest in set design also emerged during these productions. He described the late nights spent transforming the performing arts room into a "theatre" and the satisfaction gained working with his peers towards a common goal. These experiences have

been integral to how Kyle views his work as a drama teacher, particularly the importance of effectively connecting theory and practice through engaging in production work.

Given Kyle's success in both curricular and non-curricular drama, it is not surprising that he was drawn to a career in drama teaching. Furthermore, it appears that Kyle is particularly focused on being able to help students who may struggle to fit in, lack self-confidence or lack academic ability as he did as a student at school.

Discussion

The narrative portraits highlight a number of key moments where participants experienced belonging, personal growth, improved health and well-being, self-worth, confidence, and respect. Three key themes emerge that illustrate how important curricular and non-curricular drama was to the participants as students at school. Each of these threads are highlighted and elaborated in turn.

Importance of Belonging

It is evident that the lack of belonging participants' experienced at school had detrimental effects on their self-esteem, peer relationships, academic achievement and enjoyment of school. The link between belonging and positive academic and social outcomes is recognised (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Osterman, 2000), leading Brendtro and Larson (2006) to emphasise that every person, no matter what age, possesses a fundamental need to belong and that the positive feelings that come from belonging contribute substantially to a healthy self-esteem.

Fortunately for these participants, the sense of belonging they found in their drama classes was profound, enabling them to build their self-confidence, create support networks, and ultimately experience success. It was evident that participants felt safe to work creatively, were well supported by their drama teacher and were able to be themselves in a class of like-minded peers. Ewing (2010) notes that participation in the Arts provides students with a sense of social cohesion: "an increased friendship or social network, increased contact with other cultures, a sense of 'belonging' to a particular group/club/network/community" (p. 49).

Value of Drama

It is evident that participants in this study are highly invested in their drama practice, as they understand implicitly the benefits that drama can provide to young people. Ewing (2010), in describing benefits to health and well-being through participating in Arts programs, found "an improved physical and/or mental health, reduction in stress or pain, reduction in morbidity,

increased physical and mental activity, [and] a more positive outlook on life” (p. 49). Benefits to health and well-being are certainly reflected in Simone and Cindy’s stories as they described the sense of belonging they found in their drama classes, the connections they made and the close community of like-minded people with whom they enjoyed working; these conditions enabled them to thrive and experience success. Similarly, Claire’s story documented her transformation from being “painfully shy” to having the self-confidence to perform on stage. Kyle’s story described the success he experienced and his improved sense of self-worth through involvement in curricular and non-curricular drama activities. It is most evident that these participants’ experiences of drama were transformational and have stimulated life-long interest in drama. Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep shift in thoughts, feelings and activities (Mezirow, 2003) and, as Ewing (2010) suggests, often includes a change in our understanding of ourselves and our relationships with others.

Teacher as Role Model

Participants in this study experienced some inspirational and highly effective drama teachers during their school years who were integral in their decision to become drama teachers. The participants’ recollections record the respect they have for their drama teachers, particularly for their ability to create highly effective, creative environments where students gained a sense of belonging and were encouraged to take risks while learning about drama practice. It would appear that these drama teachers were dedicated to their work, student-centred, and provided opportunities for students to develop their personal skills and talents. Consequently, the participants’ teacher identities are partially constructed of the positive characteristics of the drama teachers they learned from during their schooling (Murphy, Delli & Edwards, 2004; Ng et al., 2010).

Furthermore, participants were aware of the diverse responsibilities of drama teachers. This awareness has been partly formed by their experiences at school, especially the many productions their drama teachers produced, and the hard work, dedication, and time commitments these teachers demonstrated. Armed with this knowledge, participants possessed an eagerness to engage in non-curricular activities, despite the added challenges and stress that this discipline involves.

Conclusion

Knowing pre-service teachers’ beliefs is important because these beliefs play a crucial role in their own learning, teaching methods, and classroom practices (Bryan, 2003; Uzuntiryaki & Boz, 2007). Since previous research on pre-service teacher beliefs confirms that teacher educators may exert some influence on pre-service teachers’ beliefs about teaching (e.g. Ng et al., 2010), it is recommended that reflecting on past experiences of drama and investigating

the influence of these experiences should feature prominently throughout pre-service drama education. Furthermore, attending to pre-service drama teacher's basic need to belong may need consideration in order to maximise their learning during teacher education. Perhaps, given the level of maturity and responsibility expected of pre-service teachers, attending to their basic needs is overlooked by teacher educators. Subsequently, understanding ways universities consider the basic needs of pre-service teachers could be an area worthy of investigation.

While it is important for pre-service drama teachers to have good role models to aspire to, it is important for them to recognise that it takes time and experience to reach such a high standard. Therefore, pre-service drama teachers must be 'in-tune' with their beliefs so as to avoid forming unrealistic expectations of themselves as novice teachers which may exacerbate pressure and stress.

Participants' reflections on their experiences of school drama revealed that while they enjoyed aesthetic learning about drama as an art form through developing skills, concepts and knowledge, they reflected more vividly on the enjoyment and benefits they gained from their personal and social learning (Neelands & Goode, 2000). While these participants may not be aware of their personal subjectivities (Wales, 2009), it is evident that their previous experiences of school drama have had considerable influence on their orientations of teaching drama.

Considering the position of power teachers are in, it is essential that pre-service teachers are aware of their subjectivities and beliefs about teaching, how they are formed, and how they operate in the classroom. Given the transformational nature of drama, teaching drama requires a teacher who can understand their own beliefs, orientations, and internal journey, so that they may interact with students in authentic and empowering ways.

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