

The School Drama Partnership: Beyond an Artist-in-Residence Program



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Abstract Research documenting the effectiveness of educational or process drama as critical, quality pedagogy particularly in enhancing English and literacy (e.g., Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013; Saunders, 2015; Ewing 2010b; Ewing, Simons with Campbell & Hertzberg, 2004; Miller Saxton, 2004, 2016; Baldwin & Fleming, 2003) has not impacted in many Australian primary classrooms. Further, Australian teachers report feeling pressured to concentrate on the more technical aspects of the teaching of literacy (and numeracy) as measured in increasingly high stakes tests. It is within this educational context that the *School Drama*TM program was conceived initially in 2008 and developed over the last decade. This chapter first focuses on the relationship developed between a leading Australian theatre company, Sydney Theatre Company (STC) and the University of Sydney's Faculty of Education and Social Work (FESW) in order to use one art-form, drama, as a lens to interrogate another, contemporary literary texts for children, to enhance literacy learning in its deepest sense. It pays particular attention to the role of the teaching artists in the program and their work with participating primary teachers. The outcomes of the project, from their perspectives and the development of what we have described as a collaborative zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978; Ewing, 2015; Moll, Whitmore, 1993) are then discussed. The final act explores some of the outcomes and implications for the ongoing sustainability of the program.

Keywords Drama as critical, quality pedagogy · Drama, literature and literacy · Co-mentoring teacher professional learning · Role of teaching artists · Collaborative zone of proximal development

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1 Background: The Australian Education Context, Drama and Literacy in the Primary Classroom

Despite unequivocal evidence that arts rich pedagogy has the potential to enhance student social and emotional wellbeing and academic learning outcomes across the curriculum (e.g., Martin et al. 2013; Ewing 2010a; Catterall 2009, 2013; Bamford 2006; Deasy 2002; Fiske 1999) many Australian primary teachers do not feel well equipped to embed the Arts in what they see as an already overcrowded curriculum and overwhelming pressure from all education providers to concentrate on what can be described as a narrow intended curriculum.

More specifically, research documenting the effectiveness of educational or process drama as critical, quality pedagogy particularly in enhancing English and literacy (e.g., Winner et al. 2013; Ewing and Saunders 2016; Saunders 2015; Ewing 2010b; Ewing et al. 2016; Miller and Saxton 2004, 2016; Baldwin and Fleming 2003) has not impacted in many Australian primary classrooms. Australian teachers report feeling pressured to concentrate on the more technical aspects of the teaching of literacy (and numeracy) as measured in increasingly high stakes tests. This is not only the case in Australia: other western education systems are also working within an increasing regulatory, high stakes testing national context.

It is within this educational context that the *School Drama*TM program was conceived and developed Fig. 1. This chapter first focuses on the relationship developed between a leading Australian theatre company, Sydney Theatre Company (STC)



Fig. 1 The school drama teacher professional learning program began in 2009. (Photo courtesy of Sydney Theatre Company)

and the University of Sydney's Faculty of Education and Social Work (FESW) in order to use one artform, drama, as a lens to interrogate another, contemporary literary texts for children in order to enhance literacy learning in its deepest sense. Subsequent acts pay particular attention to the role of the teaching artists in the program and their work with participating primary teachers. The outcomes of the project, from their perspectives and the development of what we have described as a collaborative zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978; Ewing 2015; Moll and Whitmore 1993) are then discussed. The final act explores some of the outcomes and implications for the ongoing sustainability of the program.

The prologue, initially sets the scene for this discussion by describing how the program was conceptualised.

2 Prologue: The Birth of the *School Drama*TM Program

We play a part in making a creative, forward-thinking and sociable future by engaging with young people, students and teachers. (<https://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/about/artistic-vision>)

This quote is drawn from Sydney Theatre Company's artistic vision. It goes some way to describe why a leading Australian theatre company might partner with an education faculty to engage teachers and their students in creating a more positive and creative school curriculum: one in which drama has its rightful place as both an artform and as pedagogy. The heart of the program is its co-mentoring professional learning approach (Le Cornu 2005; Ewing 2002). Professional actors or teaching artists work with primary teachers' to develop their professional knowledge of and expertise about the impact of drama on children's English and literacy outcomes using contemporary literary texts. This relates to STC's Education mission that specifically aims to:

provide young people in NSW with possibilities to play, imagine and learn through the provision of theatre and theatre-based education programs of the highest standard. (<https://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/community/education>)

In late 2007 Helen Hristofski (Sydney Theatre Company Education Manager 2006–2012) and Robyn Ewing (University of Sydney) began discussing a potential collaboration. They met with STC's Co-Artistic Directors Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton to discuss the role artists might play in primary schools and then hosted a meeting with teachers to further discuss possibilities. In April 2008 the newly appointed Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, held a summit in Canberra to establish a direction for Australia's future. The *2020 Summit* brought together leaders from a range of sectors to address key policy areas. One of the 10 strands was *Towards a Creative Australia*. It was co-chaired by Cate Blanchett, Professor Julianne Schultz (Griffith University) and Minister Peter Garrett (then Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts). Ewing participated in the Creative Australia strand and discussion about the potential collaboration between STC and the

University of Sydney continued. Following the summit, Blanchett, Upton, Ewing and Hristofski continued developing the concept and the *School Drama*TM program emerged. It was decided given the emphasis on English and literacy in the first phase of the incoming *Australian Curriculum* that the program would focus on using the art form of drama in this Key Learning Area. Piloted in five schools across Sydney the following year, the methodology of the program is based on Ewing's (2002, 2006) use of drama as critical quality pedagogy with literary texts. Her co-mentoring model was developed with teachers from Harbord, Curl Curl North and Crown St Public Schools over 25 years.

3 Act 1: The *School Drama*TM Program

In brief, the *School Drama*TM program focuses on building teacher confidence and expertise in the use of educational or process drama conventions to explore quality children's literature and enhance student engagement and English and literacy learning outcomes. The model has always used the art form of drama to deepen the understanding of another art form, literature, aimed at enhancing literacy outcomes, although, the literary arts often go unacknowledged in references to arts disciplines (Ewing 2010a, b).

Participating teachers are first introduced to the range of process drama devices or strategies using contemporary literary texts through workshops facilitated by Ewing and Saunders. The Actors or teaching artists selected to work in the program also undergo a professional development program although some also have educational qualifications. The teaching artists work alongside participant classroom teachers to plan a 7 week program focused on a particular English or literacy area that has been identified by the teachers. These may include inferential comprehension, imaginative/creative writing, oracy or descriptive language. The program is then team taught with the teaching artist initially modelling the drama devices or strategies (for example, hotseating, sculpting, depiction, conscience alley, readers' theatre) as lenses to explore different aspects of the chosen literary text(s). Saunders, a former Head of Arts in a secondary school, and now Director of Education and Community Partnerships at STC, oversees the teaching artists' planning and is always available to provide advice and ongoing mentoring to the teaching artists. In addition, he works as a teaching artist in one school each term.

In best case scenarios the class teacher then consolidates this learning between the artist's visits, often modelling the strategies for other teachers in their school. Over the timeframe it is expected that the class teacher will gain confidence and expertise in using drama devices and strategies and choosing quality literature to meet the needs of his or her students. This increased confidence will be reflected in the teacher assuming greater responsibility for the planning and implementation of the program particularly in the final weeks of the workshops. At the same time the teaching artist develops an understanding of using drama as their artform in a classroom context for the specific needs of students. Building on Vygotsky's (1978)

work as extended by Moll and Whitmore (1993) we propose that these experiences of both the teacher and the teaching artist can constitute a collective Zone of Proximal Development and expand this further in Act 3 below. In essence, the classroom teacher is sharing their knowledge of their students, and literacy teaching and learning with the teaching artist. At the same time, the teaching artist is sharing their knowledge and expertise of using process drama devices in an applied context (ie an English unit). Only through combining their professional knowledge of the two can the exploration of drama as critical quality pedagogy to improve student literacy learning be achieved. In turn the students benefit through improved self confidence, engagement and empathy as well as in English/literacy outcomes in the identified area (Saunders 2015).

As mentioned above, the *School Drama*TM professional learning model is conceptualised as a co-mentoring approach. Instead of using the traditional conception of a mentor as **the** expert knower, the mentoring process is reframed as one of co-learning that positions the participants in a non-hierarchical or reciprocal relationship (Le Cornu 2005). The different participants have different knowledges and understandings to share and each respects the expertise of the other. The teachers learn about the use of drama as critical quality pedagogy (Ewing 2002, 2006) while the teaching artists learn about adapting their professional theatre skills to a particular literacy focus in specific classroom and school contexts. The children benefit from the teacher's learning and ongoing use of drama devices with literary texts to deepen understandings and improve identified literacy outcomes. The program is thus dependent on the development of an authentic partnership between each educator and teaching artist: both must work to ensure a respectful relationship that values the expertise of the other and one that can weather rigorous discussion about differences. The partnership is thus a significant departure from many more conventional artists-in-residence programs in that its first priority is the professional learning of the teacher. In addition, while the discipline's skills are learned and developed by both participant children and teachers, drama is used as transformative pedagogy for the interrogation of literature.

Since its inception in 2009, the *School Drama*TM program has continued to be refined and grow. In 2013, John Nicholas Saunders was appointed as Education Manager at STC to lead the growth of the program. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, from humble beginnings in the 2009 pilot, *School Drama*TM has grown (an average annual growth of 140% over 10 years). In 2018 the program had reached over 27,000 teachers and their students through *School Drama*TM. *School Drama*TM is now a cornerstone of Sydney Theatre Company's Education program.

As part of the partnership between STC and the University of Sydney's Faculty of Education and Social Work (FESW), STC commissioned annual evaluations of the program by independent researchers at the University of Sydney, Gibson and Smith. Along with annual evaluations (Campbell et al. 2010; Gibson 2011, 2012, 2013) a meta-analysis was completed (Gibson and Smith 2013) and several case studies have been undertaken (eg, Saunders 2015; Smith 2014; Sze 2013; and Robertson 2010), with several more in progress. The research to date has mostly aimed to investigate the impact of the program on teacher learning and school

sustainability rather than solely on student learning outcomes. Saunders' (2015) case study, however, investigated the student academic and non-academic outcomes. His findings are discussed in Act 3.

Earlier writing (eg, Ewing et al. 2011) has focused particularly on the impact of the professional learning from the perspectives of the participant teachers. The following section provides a fine grained discussion from the perspective of the teaching artists. One of the STC's aims for *School Drama*TM was to provide different kinds of work opportunities for professional actors. The program has fulfilled this with 27 teaching artists in Sydney, Wollongong, Darwin, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Melbourne and Albury/Wodonga (regional).

4 Act 2 Scene i: Through the Eyes of the Teaching Artist

As discussed above, a critical feature of the program is the role of the actors or teaching artists who work alongside classroom teachers once a week for 7 weeks in term two, three or four of the school year. They model the use of educational or process drama devices, with authentic literary texts to address specific English or literacy outcomes identified by the class teacher. This section explores why this program is more than an artist-in-residence program and particularly explores how it benefits the actors/teaching artists.

Eric Booth argues that the term 'Teaching Artist' originated in the United States of America during the turn of the twentieth century and spread more widely during the 1970s and 1980s. Booth defines a Teaching Artist as "an artist who chooses to include artfully educating others, beyond teaching the technique of the artform, as an active part of a career (Booth 2009, p. 3)." The *School Drama*TM program subscribes to elements of Booth's definition. Our Teaching Artists are professional artists (whether that be an artist as an actor, artist in applied/community theatre or an artist of Drama). All come from a similar theatre or drama tertiary background and have specialised in different areas of the field. Each artist brings their own unique understandings and expertise to the program. For example one of *School Drama*TM's longest serving teaching artists is a professional storyteller as well as an actor and academic. Many others alternate their *School Drama*TM teaching with regular work in theatre, television and/or film. Others have found the experience so rich and productive, they have since completed teaching qualifications.

There is a range of challenges for the teaching artists. Like the teachers, they all complete a questionnaire about their expectations before they begin the program, and then another following the term's experience. Saunders also engages in a debriefing focus group discussion with the teaching artists at the end of every term. The challenges raised by the teaching artists include: the initial consultation and planning session with the class teacher and negotiation of quality literary texts; the uniqueness of every teacher and every classroom context – a factor that cannot be overstated; and, the importance of developing a trusting relationship with the teacher based on mutual respect in a very short time frame so that the co-teaching and

co-learning will be optimal. Gibson, 's ongoing evaluation of the program (2012, 2010) also highlights several other variables that may affect the success of the program:

- The classroom teacher's experience, personal desire to participate in the program and prior experience with the Creative Arts¹ especially drama;
- The students' prior learning in the Arts, the number of students within the class, and the number of students with learning/special needs;
- Potential classroom management issues; and
- Support from the principal and leadership team.

The two pre-program planning sessions are thus vital in developing the relationship with the class teacher and ensuring they will oversee any classroom management issues. An important issue here is whether the class teacher initially wants to be involved in *School Drama*TM themselves or whether they were 'asked' to do it by their Principal or supervisor. Interestingly some teaching artists also highlight the quality of the chosen text(s). In addition the teaching artist must find a way to facilitate the transition from taking major responsibility in modelling the drama devices/strategies to encouraging the teacher participant to assume more in the final weeks of their time in the classroom. The following interview excerpts from teaching artists illustrate these challenges:

The relationship is collaborative and focussed on both the teachers' needs and their understanding of their students...that the teacher has a skill set that I don't have as an actor really helps to level out our interactions and I am able to check my ideas against what the teacher wants to achieve with the students. (Teaching Artist 2009–2014)

The challenge is making sure that neither person (particularly the teaching artist) oversteps the other person's boundaries. As far as the classroom teacher is concerned, you are entering their space, environment and it is (I believe), up to the teaching artist to respect the already established standards whilst not ignoring their own. (Teaching Artist 2013–2015)

In debriefing and focus group discussions as well as during individual interviews the teaching artists frequently comment on the personal and professional benefits they see they have gained from their involvement in the program. For example they highlight their own learning:

I learned just as much as the class teacher did. (Teaching Artist, 2010–2011)

Some focus on learning about their teaching of drama and its potential for transforming classroom literacy:

I am refining the way that I teach strategies and have expanded my repertoire of strategies this year. The program has given me ...a sense of satisfaction in my working life that I was not expecting to find outside of performance. (Teaching Artist 2009–2015)

As always, the experience has been extremely positive, both professionally and personally. I am passionate about, and believe that the Creative Arts are central to learning. Being involved in School Drama provides inspiring and concrete examples of such learning while

¹In New South Wales, the Creative Arts are a term used in primary schools and include four Arts subjects (Dance, Drama, Music and Visual Art).

deepening my understanding and appreciation of drama as a powerful medium for developing literacy. (Teaching Artist 2009–2015)

These comments indicate that Sydney Theatre Company has been able to create meaningful professional learning for the Teaching Artists as well as the teachers.

In Act 2 Scene ii, we examine how teachers perceive the learning gained by the teaching artist from working alongside them over the 7 weeks.

5 Act 2 Scene ii: The Teaching Artist Through the Teachers' Eyes

Consistently over the 10 years of the program the participating teachers have acknowledged the expertise of the professional actors working with their classes. In their post program questionnaires the teachers rank the one to one co-mentoring as the highest benefit with accolades such as:

The most valuable professional learning in my thirty year career; Brilliant mentors who are passionate about the program.

Others focus on the collaborative aspect and the benefits of working together to achieve identified learning outcomes for the students:

The team teaching aspect ... the support ... getting to put ideas into practice; Two 'experts' working together for the benefit of students' learning outcomes.

The actor from STC was exceptional. She quickly built a good rapport with the students and was able to handle difficult children if the need arose.

When responding to what teachers feel the teaching artist gains from the experience, many teachers noted the deeper understanding and appreciation of what it is like to teach and the challenges of working with a range of students with diverse needs as illustrated by this comment:

A sense of the challenges faced by teachers: the diverse range of learning needs among students; behavioural issues and timetabling constraints; and the desire to develop strategies that address the literacy objective more specifically. (Classroom Teacher 2015)

In the following section we extend our notion of collaborative learning to theorise that the co-mentoring model can facilitate a collaborative Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotskys 1978; Moll and Whitmore 1993; Ewing 2015).

6 Act 3: Teacher and Teaching Artist: A Collaborative Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky defined the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as: a distance between the actual developmental level determined by individual problem solving and the level of development as determined through **problem solving under guidance or in collaboration** with more capable peers. (1978, p. 86, our emphasis).

The ZPD has most often been used to describe the scaffolding that a teacher engages in to enable a student to move to a new level of learning. Vygotsky theorised that dialogic and collaborative practices empowered learners to reframe a problem to formulate a potential solution in their own words. He emphasised the quality of the interaction and suggested that what begins collectively in discussion is then internalised by individual learners to be reframed for other learning contexts. Collaborative learning and development and individual learning and development are therefore integrally entwined with each other. Building on Vygotsky's (1978) notion of a Zone of Proximal Development and its elaboration over the last four decades (Moll and Whitmore 1993) Fernandez et al. (2001) theorised that the ZPD concept could also be extended to include symmetrical as well as asymmetrical relationships (e.g., Fernandez et al. 2001). Earlier we discussed the critical nature of the co-mentoring model of professional learning embodied in *School Drama*TM. Where the program works best for both the teacher and the teaching artist, there is genuine co-planning, team teaching and ongoing dialogic learning from each other. It is our contention that where the relationship works best, a collaborative Zone of Proximal Development develops between the teaching artist and the teacher (Ewing 2015). Teachers and teaching artists challenge each other to extend their own learning and expertise. The artist shares their knowledge and expertise in creative learning through process drama devices while the teacher shares their knowledge of literacy, understanding of the students' learning needs and the particular school and classroom learning context. For this to be a truly dialogic relationship professionally extending both the teacher and teaching artist they must each provide sufficient time for reflection after each session and ongoing planning.

This collaborative ZPD is reflected in the comment of one teaching artist who argues:

School Drama is a much more collaborative environment for everyone involved compared to other programs I've been involved in. It is not about the Teaching Artist showing the students and teacher how they can do something that they could mimic. It is about discovering things together and for the Teaching Artist to offer ways of making those discoveries.

A participant teacher discusses the dramatic extension of her learning:

Well, who'd have thought that drama could actually be so engaging to teach? It has been an inspirational journey for me. Although my learning curve has been a steep one, I can see a whole range of ways that drama can be incorporated into the curriculum. (letter to artist, in Ewing 2010a)

In Saunders' (2015) case study, he worked as a teaching artist and researcher alongside classroom teacher, Linda O'Connor (pseudonym) with a Year 6 class. The pre-text selected for this *School Drama*TM experiences was *The Burnt Stick* (Hill 1994). Over the 7 weeks, Saunders recorded the short debrief conversations between O'Connor and Saunders. Some of these reflective interviews help illustrate the co-mentoring and co-learning model between the artist and teacher. The extract below followed a lesson where O'Connor and Saunders asked the students to lie down on the floor, close their eyes and listen to and visualise the story as they were reading the first section of the book. This was followed by a visualisation activity asking the students to imagine themselves in the two places the story is set and sharing what they can see, hear or feel.

O'Connor: *You know, I think that letting them lie down and just listen, I think is excellent.*

Saunders: *Oh you think it's helpful? I always wonder with it, because I feel like I like to just block it all out and just picture it. They weren't as silly as I thought they might have been.*

O'Connor: *No. I think they would've been sillier if they were allowed to sit together and have their eyes open. I think that making them lay down and close their eyes, then that stopped that behaviour.*

Saunders: *And I think even in that last part of the lesson after we had introduced the text and done the first round of the visualisation, it was during the second visualisation they started to deal with it in a more sensitive way and almost more respectful to the story and the place, I thought. There was less, you know, they were a bit chatty and not silly but you know, less focused at the beginning of the lesson but at the end of the lesson I thought there was a real ... they were really concentrating on what they were doing.*

O'Connor: *Yeah, I think because they had read part of the story they've got a focus ... so they have got John Jagamarra now to focus on and think about. And Eamon² saying like exactly what the author wanted, that Pearl Bay Mission sounded fantastic at the beginning but then when you heard more that you realised that it wasn't such a nice place. Yeah, they were really listening. I thought it was great. (12/08/2014)*

Saunders made the following comments when reflecting on the conversation:

This reflective conversation with Linda made me realise what an impact the visualisation strategy can have on student learning and student engagement. Students were focused on the text and the learning and were starting to become more engaged in the work. I could see that the students knew I had a positive working relationship with Linda [O'Connor] and that our team-teaching approach was working well. It was obvious that Linda and I had worked together and had an understanding of how we would co-teach. I felt like the class were starting to trust me.

At the end of the 7 weeks, Saunders noted that he felt he had learnt as much from working with Linda O'Connor as she had learnt from working with him. Even as a trained secondary teacher, Saunders noted that he learnt about teaching literacy from his experience working with O'Connor.

Funny, I had never heard of the 'Super Six Comprehension Strategies' that the NSW Department of Education developed. Linda introduced these to me during a conversation about metaxis. She told me about how 'connection' was a key comprehension strategy and we both talked a lot about how drama work is so strongly linked to making connections and

²Pseudonym.

other literacy strategies....I think Linda's use of teacher-in-role was particularly interesting. She took on the role of one of the characters and was hot-seated by the students. It opened my eyes to see how she added extra detail, particularly about the historical context of the story into the learning through this drama device... to be honest, I think I just really enjoyed teaching with someone else. Our skill sets complemented each others and we had such different experiences in our teaching careers, that we both had things we could learn from the other. It was fantastic. It was collaborative and it was really engaging to co-plan and co-teach with Linda.

During the final debrief with Linda, Saunders asked her what she felt she had learnt from the experience. Linda said:

I always learn a lot. I do. And I love being involved in it. It is just amazing to see the kids engaged and learning. So they are not only engaged by they are learning as well and then I'm learning and getting new ideas and thinking how I can, you know, implement those new drama strategies somewhere else. So yeah, I just think its fantastic professional learning and that it doesn't matter how experienced a teacher you are, there is always something you can learn and use and make your own. So, you know, you can take it on board and think about it and do it in your way.

There is also an emerging case for a collaborative ZPD with the students. For example, during the final interview with Linda, she mentioned how she learnt about the text from her students.

I was surprised by just the depth of their thinking and again their thoughts and things that I hadn't even considered when I analysed the text....And sometimes the connections that they make are surprising as well. So I just think that also means that as a teacher, you can learn from your students as well. I suppose ...I am a learner as well and I'm quite happy to learn from them and I think that contributes to creating a supportive environment.

In this extract, the class teacher is starting to describe the asymmetrical collaborative ZPD relationship occurring between teacher, students and artist.

7 Finale: Implications and Longterm Sustainability of School Drama

Given the challenges facing theatre companies and their educational programs in the current Australian context including increasing cuts to Arts programs, this section considers the longterm sustainability of *School Drama*TM. We draw on the program evaluations, the 5 year meta-analysis of the evaluation (Gibson and Smith 2013); the pilot of the program in South Australia and Albury Wodonga; interviews with the STC artistic director and management as well as several case studies of teachers and teaching artists involved over the life of the program.

Overall, participant teachers report a range of positive outcomes enabled by the implementation of drama strategies in their classroom English program. Participant teaching artists and teachers also report that the in-classroom professional learning that occurs during *School Drama*TM develops teacher confidence to use drama strategies as effective tools for learning and teaching particularly in English and literacy

but in addition more generally across the curriculum. Despite the short 7 week in-class time frame, which has often been suggested by teachers at the beginning of the program as not long enough, teachers report that student literacy outcomes are enhanced and this is evidenced by the pre-and post-benchmarking they undertake with students they have chosen to profile. Other drawbacks to the longterm sustainability of the program in a school can relate to the transfer of a supportive principal or significant staff changes. In some cases, however, the transferred teacher has initiated *School Drama*TM in another school context. In a recent debriefing with teaching artists it was also felt that term 4 proved to be more rushed than the other terms with end of year celebrations sometimes intruding. In addition there was some discussion of whether the class teacher was in the 'right' space in their teaching journey to participate in the professional learning program. Some teachers were asked by school leadership to do the program and this has, from time to time led to a prickly start to the co-planning and co-teaching. Some teachers are struggling with aspects of their role and additional activities (like this program) can be seen as a burden, rather than an opportunity.

Gibson and Smith's (2013) meta-analysis of the annual evaluations from 2009 to 2012 marked the end of the pilot phase and proved the efficacy of the teacher professional learning program. Their report *The School Drama Project Meta-Evaluation 2009–2012* analysed information gathered over 4 years from participants including teacher pre- and post-program surveys, teacher and teaching artist post-engagement interviews, student pre- and post-program benchmarked work samples, and some student evaluations and observations. Gibson and Smith concluded that there was very strong evidence that teachers involved in the program increased their knowledge and confidence in using Drama-based pedagogy with quality literature; unequivocal evidence about the efficacy of the co-mentoring model between the teaching artist and class teacher; and evidence of improved student literacy through the benchmarking tasks and improvements in student confidence (Gibson and Smith 2013). Robertson (2010) and Sze's (2013) case studies explored particular classes who participated in the *School Drama*TM program. Robertson (2010) documented the teacher professional learning involved in the co-mentoring model and Sze (2013) analysed the sustainability of the program through interviews with both the principal and a participant teacher. Smith (2014) extended this case study to look at the impact of the program on teachers who had not participated directly in the work with the teaching artist.

Gibson and Smith's (2013) meta-analysis identified an issue with benchmarking in the data evaluated from 2009 to 2013. As a result of individual teachers designing their own student benchmarking tasks and rubrics during this period, comparison of data collected from school to school proved difficult, They recommended that:

If information on changes in students' learning during the implementation of the SDP [School Drama program] is to be continued then the literacy area and outcomes to be achieved should be specified and targeted benchmark strategies and a proforma for teachers' detailed analysis and report be developed and provided. (Gibson and Smith 2013, p. 5)

In response from 2014 Saunders and Ewing limited the benchmarking to the four most frequently cited English focus areas (descriptive writing, narrative writing, inferential comprehension and oracy) and developed protocols as guides for both the pre and post benchmarking.

Saunders' (2015) research found that over the 7 weeks of the program, the class he worked with demonstrated positive shifts in literacy achievement in inferential comprehension and descriptive language (through the student pre-program and post-program testing) (Fig. 2).

In addition, the students who were achieving at a mid to low level in the pre-program literacy tests had the strongest increases in literacy.

In addition, Saunders also noted positive shifts in empathy, motivation and engagement in the Year 6 students he worked with. These shifts were noted by the teacher and students. The students articulated how they observed the drama work contributed to their own learning and engagement. Some students made comments about enjoying embodying the characters, or 'acting' parts of the story out, while other students discussed links between drama and how they felt it helped them develop their comprehension and descriptive language. Surprisingly, even the students who only had minimal movement in their academic achievement in the pre- to post-program benchmarking tests explained that they felt the drama work had helped them deepen their understanding of both the text and the context. This growth in non-academic outcomes especially increased empathy and engagement identified by all participants in Saunders' case study merits further investigation.

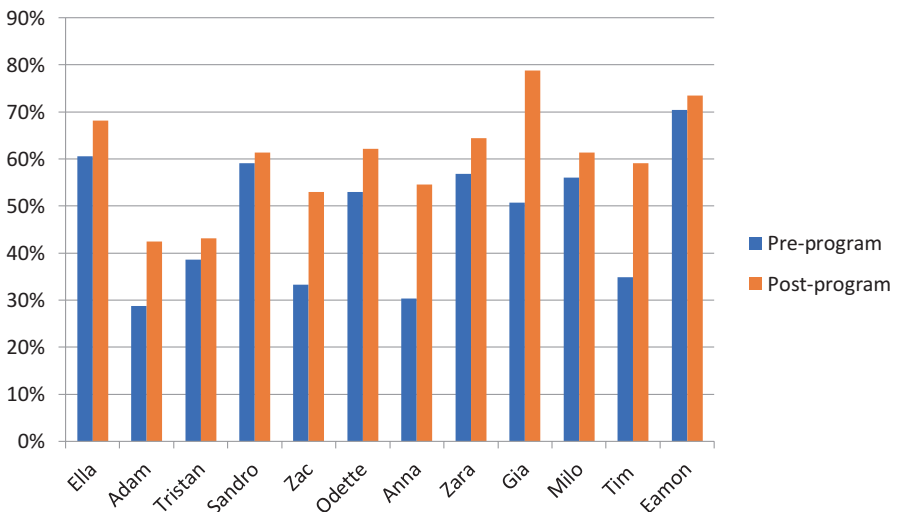


Fig. 2 Student pre- and post-program benchmarking results comparing literacy achievement before and after the program

8 Coda

The *School Drama*TM journey continues. Upton and Blanchett originally hoped that the co-mentoring teacher professional learning model of a State Theatre Company – University partnership would be adopted in every Australian state. After 10 years this possibility is becoming a reality. In 2018 several other state theatre companies and education authorities have indicated their interest in exploring the program. Long term sustainability both in terms of teachers' ongoing use of drama as critical, quality pedagogy in their enacted curriculum can only be substantially measured over time. Similarly, investigating whether student understanding, empathy and engagement in learning continues to be deepened through their use of drama conventions to interrogate text is a long term proposition and may be difficult and expensive to action. Nevertheless we are reminded that because these kind of outcomes are difficult to assess does not mean they are any less important.

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