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Educating Rita and her sisters: using drama to reimagine femininities in schools

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This article examines drama in relation to girls’ education, and considers some of the ways in which drama might be applied in schools to challenge limiting hegemonic narratives about gender and support the emerging understandings and performances of femininities of adolescent girls. It reports on case study research conducted with a Year 9 Drama class (14–15-year olds) at an Australian girls’ school, where curriculum-based drama was used to investigate the complexities of twenty-first century girlhood. The study aimed to deliberately create work for/with/by girls, where in a supportive environment girls could use their girl know-how to inform the drama. Working simultaneously both inside and beyond the curriculum, the project used Shaun Tan’s book *The Red Tree* as a core focus for a girl-centred process drama. The research study examined the ways in which the girls’ gendered knowledge was both dynamised and problematised through the dramatic processes, as the drama invited them to explore issues and intersections of self, relationship and identity performance (in everyday life and online). Unlike the Rita of Willy Russell’s play, who becomes the Pygmalion project of her older, male mentor, this drama focused on girls learning from girls, for themselves – valuing the knowledge they brought to the dramatic process and considering alternatives or possible storylines as girls. The project invited the girls to create their very own Rita, who was poised on the edge of change just like them, and to consider the critical issues and potential connections between her story and their own stories as girls. This article examines the key findings of this study and its implications for girls’ education.

**Introduction**

and the day seems to end the way it began
but suddenly there it is right in front of you
bright and vivid
quietly waiting
just as you imagined it would be

*The Red Tree* (2001) by Shaun Tan

Drama in education has long held notions of student empowerment, dialogue and voice at the heart of practice. The human condition, with all its imperfections and intricacies, drives dramatic action as students use role and performance to explore the problematic storylines and contexts of what Dorothy Heathcote famously termed ‘man in a mess’. Strong drama-learning experiences build students’ critical capacities,
where role and symbolic representation open up events or issues, enabling students to practically develop and rehearse their empathic intelligence (Arnold 2005). In secondary schools, curriculum drama often has a dual focus: on one hand, the prescribed curriculum provides students with a repertoire of skills and understandings that enable them to work as artists, imaginatively creating dramatic works and performances for specific purposes and audiences; this is often in itself an empowering learning process for students. On the other hand, the enacted drama curriculum can provide significant opportunities for student meaning-making through and beyond the artwork itself, with students’ understandings about being human and about humanity often dynamised and transformed through the collaborative drama-learning experience. Drama learning often occurs at the edges of realities, operating in the more volatile and problematic terrain of self-esteem, identities and relationships. As a relational pedagogy, drama relies on the co-creation and negotiation of meaning where artistic processes can provide new insights and shared understandings. In this sense, the classroom becomes an evocative space where voices become visible, where stories can be created, embodied and shared and, importantly, where belonging, self-esteem and agency can be playfully rehearsed and revised. The importance of drama learning for the enhancement of student empathy, agency and critical hope cannot be underestimated – this is important extraordinary everyday work we do in drama classrooms.

**Describing the study**

The study at the centre of this article has developed from my continuing research interests in drama, the contribution of drama to girls’ education and the critical learning that drama provides for many adolescent girls who elect to study drama in secondary schools. My previous research studies focused on drama as a strengthening process, using playbuilding and narrative inquiry methods with girls to play with ‘storying’, meaning-making and identity construction (see Hatton 2005, 2007). This research study examined the ways in which classroom drama, and process drama in particular, can be used to enhance girls’ self-understanding, gender esteem and sense of agency. The school site was a multicultural all-girls Catholic school in Sydney’s outer suburbs. The participant group was a Year 9 elective drama class of fifteen 14–15-year-old girls, from various cultural backgrounds. This particular class and year group had recently experienced some of the girl issues embedded within the drama, such as problems with friendship networks, bullying in school and online, and issues of self-esteem, well-being and group cohesion. The school had a strong pastoral care programme but teachers reported that they often felt frustrated that the girls’ online interactions only became school matters when they became explosive. Staff were keen to see this study as a pilot project, where drama could be used to develop the girls’ awareness of the issues so that they could learn and collaborate more effectively as girls.

Using drama as an intervention, this case study documented and analysed the learning process of a single group of adolescent girls in a series of four workshops over three consecutive days. The workshops were conducted both in their normal drama lessons and after school, and lasted between 90 minutes and 2 hours. They were led by myself as a visiting teacher/researcher and their classroom teacher was also present and supportive of the learning process. Case study design enabled me to
focus on the group and their responses to the drama. I was keen to trace students’ engagement in a process drama that had been specifically designed to help them and provide frames and lenses where they could view and make sense of some of the complex issues they might be dealing with in their own lives. Process drama offered a self-contained learning process that could get us to the heart of girlhood issues within a short space of time. The strong story focus and role-based inquiry of the drama enabled the group to quickly access the complexity of the dramatic context we were investigating. As an arts-based study, the artistic work of the students provided rich data for analysis. Each workshop was photographed and video recorded, and the girls’ comments, suggestions, improvisations and responses provided rich data sources. Photos and videos were coded and analysed in terms of evidence of student engagement in the key phases of the dramatic process, the role and narrative choices they made, and also their out-of-role behaviour and responses as the drama developed. The creative and reflective writing completed by students (individually and in groups) was also collected for analysis; these included brainstorming ideas, role on the wall responses, reflective writing and writing in role examples such as letters of advice to Rita. Within the workshop process, one semi-structured interview was conducted with pairs of students. These were later transcribed, coded and analysed according to critical ideas and discourses evident in the girls’ ‘sense-making’ of the drama work and the connections they made between the drama and the girls’ own lives and experiences (particularly with reference to their use of social media).

**Educating Rita — a girl-focused process drama**

The workshops used a girl-centred process drama to drive the inquiry about a fictional twenty-first-century girl called Rita, and used Shaun Tan’s beautiful book *The Red Tree* (2001) as the core pre-text. This book is a rich text for classroom drama work, particularly when working with adolescent girls. With its evocative images and simple text, it charts the ‘emotional worlds’ of a girl as she moves from overwhelming despair and depression to hope, when the red tree of her imagination bursts with colour and life into her dull, everyday world. Filled with metaphors and symbols in its detailed intricate pictures, the book makes a wonderful catalyst for process drama because it is open to interpretation yet holds a profound message — that hope is possible. Given that contemporary girlhood can be a fraught and complex endeavour, *The Red Tree* is a perfect pre-text to use in drama with adolescent girls because it goes deeply into the murky terrain of human feelings and experience.

The dramatic process used in this study was designed to give the girls a fictional space in which to problematise knowledge and consider alternative ways of performing ‘girl’. Through creating and enacting part of Rita’s story, the girls were invited to consider ways of counteracting some of the destructive and deficit discourses that impact and shape feminine adolescence. The simple storyline of a girl changing schools traversed complex terrain through the narrative thread of the process drama. A number of difficult concepts drawn from the driving theoretical frameworks of feminist pedagogies, sociology and post-structuralist theory were woven into Rita’s story to ensure that the world and story created presented a realistically complex web of tensions, challenges and ambiguities faced by the character. The story tapped into a range of concepts such as identity as a project
Performing ‘girl’ as a complex identity project

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in girl studies and girlhood in both research and popular culture. In late modernity, young people are pressured to engage in constant identity work, to produce themselves as particular kinds of individuals in various social contexts (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005, 112). Giddens’ notion (1991) of the reflexive and active process of fashioning one’s biography is relevant here, where young people struggle to shape a coherent ‘choice’ biography despite the powerful regimes and social conditions that constrain their choice and agency. Youth identities have been conceptualised as construction sites (Weis and Fine 2000), where the markers of gender, sexuality, class and race are interwoven and juggled dynamically in particular social contexts. Gender and one’s sense of femininity are socially constructed through gender regimes (Connell 2002). Gender is embodied and performative, and constituted through discourses and power relations...
Butler (1990). Poststructuralist theorists see gender as being in a constant state of flux as individuals make sense of patterns and punishments that shape gender as an everyday, contextualised performance. Butler asserts that gender is an incessant project of daily reconstruction and interpretation (Butler 1988, 131).

Much has been written about girls being under siege and objectified by mass media, which in turn has a negative impact on their well-being (American Psychologists Association 2007). Girls are encouraged to create an objectified relationship with their body (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005, 137) where every facet is judged in terms of perfection as objects of the male gaze. Girls' notions of feminine bodies and sexualities are constructed under the pervasive and contradictory influence of neoliberal heteronormativity, where they are compelled to perceive sex as a commodity. Desirability is the currency of performing 'girl' successfully, referred to by Angela McRobbie as the 'post-feminist masquerade' (2008). Competing and contradictory discourses shape the way girls perceive and perform gendered identities and sexualities, requiring a continuing improvisation as girls travel through the entanglements of youthful femininity (McRobbie 2007). There is a requirement to adhere to the hypersexualised display of femininities whilst, simultaneously, girls are socialised to regard their own bodies with suspicion and are alienated from the abject, leaking female body (Kristeva 1982; Grosz 1994, 203). Schools, families and peers as 'gender regimes' (Connell 2002, 53) police and regulate girls' performances of gender, their sexualities and desires.

Online environments and social media provide spaces where contemporary teenage girls can be players, where they can cross boundaries regarding performances of self, creating new ways to articulate desire and community. Many teenage girls create blogs, contribute to forums, post on YouTube and manage followers, friends and foes on Tumblr, Twitter, Formspring and Facebook, performing a range of digital identities and managing their networked publics (Boyd 2008). Online environments, teenage girls engage in performances of self for complex audiences. For many girls, this involves serious impression management (Goffman 1959), which involves a sophisticated sense of audience and significant surveillance of other girls on a daily basis. For a drama researcher interested in how girls perform identities, this terrain is a rich territory for investigation.

**Research snapshots from the girl zone**

A key constraint of this pilot study was the time frame. The first workshop introduced the project to the girls and involved whole class discussions, writing activities and some 'getting to know you' activities. This allowed me to assess the skills and social dynamics of the class and allowed the girls to get used to me as a teacher and the drama content. Before starting the drama, the girls were asked to consider how we learn how to perform being a 'girl' today. Group brainstorming activities were used to open up the girlhood terrain and its cultural capital, excavating some of what we know or inherit when we grow up as a 'girl'. As a class, we discussed the way girls learn about gender and how context shapes femininities. The girls brainstormed some of the requirements for performing gender successfully (both male and female)
and the class then reflected on how many of these requirements were contradictory and difficult to embody consistently across contexts.

The process drama began in the second workshop during class time. It involved the girls creating a fictional girl character called Rita, who we imagined as the small girl in Tan’s book *The Red Tree*. She was like them and at a school like theirs, but she was a new student to this fictional school. Intriguingly she had moved to the school midway through the school term. Initially the students were cast in role as teachers to role-play a scene that considered the ways in which this new girl could be supported at the school. The girls had little experience in whole class improvisation and this was clearly a delicious and risky first meeting with the dramatic context (a number of girls referred in interview to the whole class improvisations being a point of resonance for them as they worked on the problems from the inside). Interestingly, our first whole-group role play as Rita’s teachers at her new school revealed a snapshot of the power dynamics at play within the class:

Watching the girls working in the first whole class improvisation as Rita’s teachers is revealing. The first supportive advice for the character comes from the most isolated student in the class – it’s good advice too, about supporting Rita to participate in groups effectively, to help her fit in. Others follow. The attractive, slim, confident girls with long hair are all smiling . . . they are in role but are not quite ‘in role’ all at once. Realising midway through the improvisation that they have the whole class’s attention in the moment, two work together with heavy foreign accents and exaggerated nerdy characters to offer to teach Rita cultural dances as a way of helping her settle in to her new school. Most of the class laughs. The blonde girl exaggerates her voice even more (is she mimicking a teacher they all know?) and adds some strange dance moves and the class laughs again on cue. Her power-buddies alongside her laugh and look knowingly. I acknowledge each contribution in role as the principal and bring the meeting back to the core line of inquiry. A moment later I ask how the group of teachers might support Rita in terms of pastoral care; the blonde girl’s hand dashes up once again, in her funny eastern European accent she offers a suggestion: ‘She can sit by herself . . . I do!’ . . . Adoring laughter from most of the girls again. I remind the group of teachers assembled how important it is that we help facilitate Rita’s ‘fresh start’ and summarise the suggestions given so far and skip her latest one. Perhaps this girl is just diffusing the tension, but in an instant she asserts power over the narrative and skews it her way. Is she trying to derail the first serious task? Possibly. She is powerful enough to mock the activity from within as it happens, but also the inquiry topic, teachers and foreigners as well in a single moment. This girl is a player in real life as well perhaps. The teacher confirmed later that she and her buddies were part of the dominant group in the year who were active online and offline bullies. I wonder if their targets were in this class as well? (Analytic memo, workshop 2 . . . building the dramatic context).

Improvised moments like these allow students to play, where the work on the floor reaffirms the rules of the power networks within the class, staged through the role play. The work needs to be open enough to allow for all contributions to take shape or take the floor, yet the inquiry needs to be strong enough to ride challenges or attempts at derailment from within. Subtle subterfuge within role can be a girl form of resistance, where they can play against the action from within it, thereby exerting relational power onto the fiction. The emerging narrative and the critical work around the action then needs to foreground multiple points of view and possibilities in the ‘what if’ context of the drama, and potentially break the hold that powerful individuals might have over the emerging meanings.
Analysis of the workshop videos early in the drama showed the students once again adopting roles in the drama that were comfortable or compatible to their place within the power networks of the class:

Students work in small groups to play a first meeting between Rita, her mother and the year adviser. I place them in groups and try to jumble up the power network in the room. Some of them don't seem comfortable in these new groupings. Each student is given a different objective to play through the scene (Rita: I don't want to talk, Mother: I just want to make this work for Rita, and the Year Adviser: I want to help). Interestingly, again the more agentive or powerful girls chose the less risky characters to play (the teachers) and after choosing their roles they immediately leant across the space to lock knuckles across the groups in solidarity as 'the teachers'. This is a signal perhaps to other students that they will control the drama once it begins? Whilst I am busy at the front giving the group of mothers their instructions, the funny blonde girl starts performing for the camera at the back of the space, posing in a silly and sexual way to camera while others laugh...she smiles and waves to the camera affirming her comfortableness with all this performing business (Analytic memo, workshop 2: developing characters).

Drama activities often provide more openness than regular learning contexts; the learning process is more informal, creating a space for silliness and seriousness to be at work in the 'work' simultaneously. Teachers try hard in earnest to set up safe spaces for this to flourish in productive ways. Expert players in the class can switch between the seriousness of the dramatic moment and their own performance as individuals, working in a fluid way back and forth as the learning process unfolds. Video analysis of classroom learning processes in drama provide illuminating insights into the way the self is at play in the fictional and lived contexts and how overacting or continual clowning almost colonises the performative learning process and the fictional space, ensuring that these key individuals are constantly maintaining their overt presence at every step of the learning episode. This interplay exemplifies Hey's (1997) findings regarding the way girls' friendship networks are arranged, policed and performatively regulated in school contexts. According to Hey, girls use a range of tactics to belong, working and re-working hegemonic discourses to create alliances and performances that hold meaning and value in the girl social world. These tactics are evident in the role play as well as in the activities around the drama work. For the more powerful girls, the freedom to 'act' silly, funny, loud or exaggerated within and around the drama reasserted and maintained their dominance in the girl social order.

In between each episode, students were invited to deconstruct the scenes, roles and narrative using their understandings of both performance and their relational knowledge as girls. They considered the challenges Rita faced and the way girls’ problems can often fall under the radar with adults because they appear to be safe, contained or normal. They then created school scenes which showed how other girls employed a subtle regime of power over Rita, where subtle threats were performed as interest or offers of friendship, such as physical closeness, feigned interest and a series of darting glances to reinforce suspicion. In the workshops and in the later interviews the girls referred to the mistrust of other girls and the pervasive sense of risk they felt as they managed the friendship realm (in school and online). Within the drama the girls considered the difficult 'real work' ahead for Rita as she tried to
negotiate new friendships and understand the rules of surviving in this new girl zone. They were particularly interested in the way power relations are subtly performed between girls at school, and how adults are often oblivious to the dangerous or risky interactions between girls. They wrote letters of advice to Rita providing strategic advice to arm her with the performative protections she needed to last beyond the first week. These ranged from the more agentive but problematic ‘girl power’ stance of ‘just be yourself’ and ‘you don’t have to impress anybody’ to the more covert masquerade that would enable Rita’s long-term survival: ‘always smile, because by smiling people will think you are nice and sweet and will want to be your friend . . .’ The binary of being ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is a constant feature of the way the girls align themselves with the discourses of femininity, or subvert them in terms of transgressions or being a mean but ‘good’ friend. These writings also show how the girls felt that Rita needed to be an astute player to perform in this complex girl network.

The girl-to-girl advice also reflected the students’ own experiences drawn from their particular girl zones and the operations of power networks they knew. More dominant girls within the power relations of class and year group wrote superficial advice that skirted around the empathic terrain of Rita’s problems. One of the more powerful girls in the class even subverted the task and, instead of writing as themselves to Rita, chose to strategically distance herself and write a patronising letter in role as the Year 9 adviser to Rita, which was a role from the earlier workshop. The most socially isolated and disenfranchised student within the class and, as I was told by her teacher, also the year group provided the most poignant letter of advice for Rita:

Dear Reeta

It must be hard moving into a new school in mid term so im writing to you to give you a few pointers. Its always good to be brave and stand up for yourself but don’t be aggressive because that will cause you to not being accepted try and fit in with people slowly without approaching them unexpectedly.

The depth of this student’s empathy with Rita and her fictional challenges shows a wisdom borne out of real-world experience. The double frame of the drama provided a space for care, courage and empathy to be experienced and communicated. The metaxis of drama learning can provide powerful moments of realisation and resonance to occur.

The class then improvised a discussion with Rita and her mother, considering where Rita might find support and advice. The group considered how hard it might be for a parent to fully understand the challenges Rita faced. A letter from Rita’s old best friend was introduced and students were invited to deconstruct the subtext and objective beneath the words. The letter itself had an overall tone of friendship, but there were also hints of problems or tensions in the relationship. The group discussed girls’ ‘performances of friendship’ and the possible impact of the letter on Rita. They considered what makes a good friend and the qualities they thought were important in their friendships. The girls in the class with limited literacy or emotional expertise to draw upon took the letter at surface value, whereas those who were more astute or had more relational know-how were able to pick the letter apart for its more negative subtext.
The drama then shifted into even more difficult terrain in terms of Rita’s narrative. Using Tan’s book *The Red Tree*, we made connections between Rita’s context in the drama and the girl in the book. I was keen to see how the drama could traverse this rich emotional landscape and make connections with other forms of alienation. The next episode in the process drama focused on the page from the book which forebodingly states: ‘then all your troubles come at once’. Alongside this text there is an image of collapsing monolithic structures crashing and sinking into a wild sea, as the tiny girl in her tiny boat is tossed into danger. This image became the pre-text for the next part of the drama, where we focused on the moment when Rita had her sea of troubles ‘come at once’. The class discussed digital identities and their own use of social media such as Facebook, Tumblr and Formspring. We discussed the way this 24/7 online presence is a complex performance work, particularly when constructing an online identity archive of performance for an audience of 700 plus. We also discussed the safety issues around adding and performing to ‘friends’ on Facebook, most of whom you do not know. Links were made to theatre and how the care that goes into a performance onstage links to the care and consideration of audience exercised in online spaces. I was interested in the unwritten or hidden ‘rules of the game’ of online identity performance and impression management on Facebook. The girls were asked to advise Rita by listing what she should and should not do online in order to fit into her new school and maintain her new friendships. Again, a set of contradictory options emerged, where the girls felt that Rita needed to understand what strategy to use at the ‘right time’. The more expert online performers/users utilised their everyday knowledge and experience to inform the drama.

In interviews, students also made connections between their lives and the drama, referring to ‘keyboard warriors’ who find their online arguments become serious the next day at school. In the interviews students also commented on the way girl friendship networks at school often became strained when girls posted photographs of outings, or were tagged in others’ photographs, which did not include some of their friends. Girls regularly engaged in surveillance and ‘Facebook stalking’ of other girls’ digital photographic archives for gossip and information about what their ‘friends’ got up to. Some of the girls referred to their voyeuristic enjoyment in being the silent audience, not confident to post status updates about themselves but spending much of their time on Facebook endlessly watching and noticing the online performances of other girls. All were aware of the constant 24/7 critical yet hidden audience of Facebook ‘friends’, where social media operates as a gallery or theatron for them.

The main complication within the Rita process drama came from an online post. After a few months of her surviving her new school, Rita received a post on her Facebook wall from someone from her previous school. In groups the students then wrote a series of comments that streamed from this post, showing different viewpoints as people ‘chimed in’ from her new and old schools. They wrote these initially as separate comments and then, as a whole class, the students co-constructed the thread, sequencing the comments to show how interest from the audience grew and the way in which the ‘trouble’ escalated. In this activity, the students were constructing the online theatron, where watchers and players came together voyeuristically to feed on the trouble. The class was encouraged to reflect on this part of the drama and how, even though we did not know what Rita did or what the exact details of the trouble were, it was clear that she was positioned under siege and
whatever she did was going to be unfairly scrutinised and judged. All the girls felt she must ‘do’ something; that if she ignored this it would only get worse. The class then problem-solved the possible actions she could take to deal with the situation effectively, such as deleting posts, responding to Danny’s post as a private message to him, and blocking him or going to someone she trusts for help. The group was invited to critically reflect on the difference between reactive online comments and face-to-face interactions, as well as the possible motivations of ‘keyboard warriors’ who felt bold enough to post on Facebook things that they would not dare say in person.

The drama concluded by mapping Rita’s survival at the school, creating scenes and improvisations that projected forward to her final school year and beyond. The group considered the memories Rita had of her schooldays and, in a whole class improvisation, they role-played a discussion Rita had with her daughter about her earlier life. As Rita, the group delicately answered the daughter’s persistent questions (with the teacher in role) and diverted discussion away from the more problematic memories. They presented Rita as a caring, wise woman who had braved her experiences with courage. Using the earlier role on the wall we had constructed for Rita, they now added new words to describe her as an adult who had moved forward in her life. The learning process ended reflectively with students returning to the text and finishing the story and drawing connections between the red tree of hope and their own lives.

Interview data showed that the drama project had resonated strongly with these girls. The students spoke about how they liked the way that Rita and her problems were ‘open to interpretation’, and how they found excitement in ‘making her up from scratch’. Their responses showed that they had enjoyed the experience of problem-solving from within her complex story and had taken away some valuable lessons that they could use in their own lives. All the girls interviewed saw the drama as important and valuable ‘work’:

…‘you can relate to it a lot and it kind of explains how you felt…’

…‘people react to different situations, and how people take it, and you know, survive the situation…’

…‘the Rita story, even though we don’t know who they are or what’s happened, it shows someone’s feelings…’

…‘giving advice to someone who might need it in the future…it feels good to give someone advice…’

…‘it shows us not to be ashamed of yourself…’

…‘I guess you have to tell girls that they are all beautiful…and what other people say to them online, like they kind of take it personally and it’s not that bad and if its online then someone is hiding behind something, and they shouldn’t take it personally…’

…‘just to keep going, like, don’t stop, keep trying…’

…‘there are good things in every situation…’

In the students’ creative work drawn from the drama, in their reflective writing and interview responses, it would seem that the girls’ existing knowledge was used both
strategically and creatively in this project. The spaces opened up by the story and the experience of enacting Rita’s problems allowed the girls some valued healing space to develop everyday courage and new knowledge. The drama positioned the girls agentively as knowing advisers, who through the dramatic process could see new ways to support the character – in doing so they rehearsed being ‘the ones who know’. They could refer to the advice and knowledge generated from the drama and potentially apply this wisdom to their own lives and contexts.

Conclusions – drama as artistic centrifuge

This project confirmed for me the need to continue to use drama to problematise, support and revise students’ understandings about gender and identity as fluid works ‘in progress’. Dramatic process affords us the form and frames to create narratives and spaces that tap into experience but also allow us to imagine doing things differently. The form acts as a centrifugal force, isolating what is important or what is lasting in the dramatic inquiry. Role and story, and their deconstruction, allow us to distil complex processes of signification and relationship, to hold them up for scrutiny and (re)position ourselves in relation to the action or emerging story. This is critical learning for young people, where identities are construction sites. Classroom projects such as these can provide powerful contexts for important learning, where students’ knowledge is valued, constructed and shared. Social cohesion is a goal for many schools and education systems around the world, yet drama’s role in supporting and dynamising school communities and students lives is only beginning to be documented. If education is about dialogue and change, then our students need the creativity, emotional agility and everyday courage to live well and embrace their futures. The power of imagination and story is critical to the work of drama educators, and if empowerment in education is our goal then our work must delve into the complexities of the personal and the challenges of contemporary living. The fictional worlds we create with students in drama provide scaffolds for feeling and analysing the human condition in flux. Judith Butler suggests that fantasy has a critical role to play in embodying possibilities so we can imagine ourselves otherwise (Butler 2004, 216–17). As learning steeped in fantasy, classroom drama processes have a significant role to play in assisting students in developing self/other knowledge which has relevance in their everyday lives.

There are numerous ethical, political and pedagogical implications for teachers working in this way with adolescents (and researching it too) – this is a complex terrain. My research has forced me to analyse the nuances of drama as a relational pedagogy and as a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (Boler 1999). Research has allowed me to question what it means to help young people live their lives more deeply. The notion of the drama classroom as a ‘safe space’ is highly problematic and yet it is still a central goal of our pedagogy in practice. Teachers work towards this goal every day. It is critical to consider the ethics and politics of care and trust (Noddings and Witherell 1991; Nicholson 2002) embedded in the pedagogical design of the drama-learning process and interrogate power dimensions and the way students’ responses and meanings are handled ‘on the floor’. What are the implications if we position ourselves as creative mentors, loving allies (Bolton 1984, 34) or in feminist terms, as ‘a witness in her defense’ (Rich 1979, 99)? Third-wave feminists have rightly critiqued the allure of utopia in feminist projects, and perhaps this is also true of our
emancipatory projects in drama education as well (see Neelands 2004). Claiming that ours is a ‘loving praxis’ is precarious (or even creepy, as teens might say), particularly in these dangerous times with our risk-conscious school settings and narrowed curriculum. Often ‘connectedness’ is a desired outcome of quality pedagogy in action, perhaps to counteract the alienating, risky and highly regulated spaces that secondary schools can be in our times. Teachers may strive for ‘connectedness’ but, as drama teachers know, to be truly ‘connected’ is hard relational work and intensely problematic. Where do we start? Who has access? How do we maintain and facilitate this in practice? We know that drama learning only works when we are connected and ready to negotiate the experience together in *complicité*. When pedagogy depends on real and embodied experiences of ‘connectedness’, as drama does, more consideration needs to be given to the boundaries, protections and ethical ways of actually practising this in the classroom. If, as Parker Palmer characterises, a good teacher is a weaver of connectedness (Palmer 1998, 11), how do we describe the complex connectedness of classroom drama, particularly in secondary schools? What role does the teacher play? Is the drama teacher a muse, provocateur, agent of change, a living breathing example of the art form in action, a friend, artist, therapist, ‘other mother’, truth-teller, caring witness, or even the ‘caring police’ (Boler 1999, 42)? It is worth continued investigation to explore the dynamics of relationship in drama teaching and the kind of pedagogical architecture created in the drama (Zatzman 2003) that might enable our students to rehearse the skills for living: to act, see, question, collaborate, witness, tell stories, critique and to make their own meanings. These are not small tasks by any means and there is an urgency to our work, as Salverson reminds us:

> We live in dangerous times, and it is a matter of practical urgency to learn to live together . . . In the face of the unknown and the desperate, we will need the courage to be happy (Salverson 2008, 254).

**Keywords:** drama curriculum; adolescence; identity construction; girl studies; feminism; relational pedagogy

**Notes on contributor**

Christine lectures in Drama and Arts Education, working with pre-service primary and secondary teachers. In her previous roles as NSW Drama Curriculum Adviser K-12 and a past president of Drama NSW in Australia, she has supported and advocated for drama teachers and students at state and national levels. Her research and publications have explored the intersections of gender, story and identity in the drama classroom, with a particular focus on the learning and teaching of adolescent girls. She has published a book for drama teachers with Sarah Lovesy entitled *Young at Art: Classroom Playbuilding in Practice* (Routledge, 2009).

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