In Rashad's Shoes: Facilitating Peer Relationships Through Drama Education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores complexities faced by drama educators striving to cultivate meaningful relationships across diverse cultures. It specifically addresses the research question: In what ways may participating in a drama education program affect the development of peer relationships between diverse young people? *The study employed aspects of action research, case study, and feminist methodologies, conducted through an eight-week drama education program with up to 40 culturally diverse young people. It examined the various challenges and experiences encountered by students in forming and maintaining reciprocal culturally diverse peer relationships. The findings indicate that drama experiences emphasizing ensemble building, relationships*

of trust, and devising were associated with fostering friendships in a culturally diverse student population. This research provides important insights for educators and artists reimagining arts engagement strategies for marginalized youth.

In November 2019, Rashad[1], an eleven-year-old refugee from South Sudan—the youngest in the group of participants—sat with other workshop participants and Tahnee in Perth, Western Australia, and shared a harrowing personal story with those participants in a drama workshop. He recounted:

> *I was being chased by two older men in a park near my house. I zig-zagged this way and that, trying to get away and then catch my breath. The men split up. They came at me from different directions and caught me by my feet. So, I tried to pull my feet out of my shoes to escape them. That didn't work. I was like a fish caught in a net of these men's bodies. They were shouting and swearing in a language I didn't know. My brother eventually caught up and pulled hard at the hair of one of the attackers. The guy stopped fighting, and they both ran away.*

Rashad, bright and cheeky but reserved at times, wriggled in his spot and awkwardly smiled. The stuffy atmosphere in the room seemed to be holding its breath. This moment felt prickly given the seriousness of Rashad's disclosure. Other groups around the room stopped their chatter to hear his story. An Afghan teen, Omar, placed a hand on Rashad's shoulder in a comforting gesture.

As facilitator of this drama workshop and the associated action research project, Tahnee became aware of the eyes in the room darting to Rashad's oversized, scuffed sneakers. Some of Rashad's peers hesitantly smiled along with him. We were no longer simply listening to a story; we were feeling Rashad's story with him. Within this strong affective moment, a pathway to devised drama was opened. The potential for understanding and connection was growing

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[1] Names have been changed to maintain participant anonymity.

from the purposeful use of storytelling as a drama process to build trust and develop empathy. The symbol of shoes that Rashad repeated throughout his retelling provided a metaphoric shared point of entry for participants, underpinning the symbolic potential of drama to represent experience.

The research project associated with Rashad and his peers explored one particular context for drama educators: teaching drama in diverse cultural contexts wherein several groups may exist alongside one another but don't necessarily meaningfully interact. This issue has become more pressing in times of globalisation, dislocation and lack of connected belonging (Wright & Down, 2021). In the post-Covid era, wherein cultural diversity and globalisation are topics of acute public interest, the idea of relationship development and bridging across cultures is particularly relevant. Since 2020, Dovchin reports, racism against people from culturally and linguistically different and Indigenous backgrounds, both in Australia and overseas, has increased at an alarming rate (2020).

While deeply concerning, the rise in racist incidents is perhaps unsurprising, given that racism is a deeply entrenched systemic problem in Australian society (Gatwiri et al., 2021). The lack of work and study opportunities and the interpersonal difficulties experienced by new migrants to Australia (Li et al., 2016) also contributed to the study's rationale, which involved adolescents from refugee backgrounds.

In the context of the issues underpinning the study, this project specifically addressed the question: *In what ways may participating in a drama education program affect the development of peer relationships between diverse young people?* Drawing on an eight-week drama program in an informal community context, the project explored, through drama, the experiences of a diverse group of adolescents. Conceived from the first author's desire to better understand the young people with whom she worked in an educational context, the project sought to engage these young people in an embodied exploration of how feelings, experiences and culture affect successful engagement in both arts and friendship. Drama, as a site for such an inquiry, contains the possibility of hope (Wright et al., 2022) and how intercultural understanding can be animated through the aesthetic and relational ways of being (Greene, 1992).

Recognising that researchers' worldviews profoundly affect

research topic, design, and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), the research question, and the broader topics of drama education, friendship and cultural diversity, reflected both personal and professional 'lenses'. Our experiences as arts teachers, for example, have consistently highlighted the pervasive effects of healthy (and unhealthy) peer relationships, particularly during adolescence, when identity is shaped and explored (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). We shared the view that performing arts and cultural inclusion in schools are critical issues, personally and professionally. We noted that students from minority cultural groups face exclusion from social and learning-related tasks, and articulated feelings of isolation, which they perceived as a result of their cultural differences. This study consequently focuses on these issues generally and culturally diverse friendships specifically, and examines the potential of drama therein.

Overview of the Literature

The study fits within the fields of cultural and educational research. The literature review considered three research areas: first, drama education focusing on cultural awareness and the elements of building ensemble, relationships of trust, and devising; second, adolescent friendship and the significance of friendship quality; and third, cultural diversity itself.

The Roles of Drama Education

In ascertaining the role of drama education in developing culturally diverse friendship, we concentrated on how cultural awareness is connected to expressive developmental and social pedagogical purposes or 'social aesthetics' (Born et al., 2017). Similarly, ensemble building, relationships of trust building, and devising exercises provided specific lenses on social pedagogical and aesthetic cognitive learning (Georgina et al., 2017). We also explored the idea that drama provides enduring qualities of respect where the imagination is released and participants taken beyond themselves, resulting in learning language, personal development, interpersonal relationships, and aesthetic understanding (Wright, 2017; Wright & Pascoe, 2015). This understanding of drama played a role in providing a collaborative pathway towards culturally diverse friendship for Rashad and his peers

in this project. We now turn to these drama processes themselves.

Cultural Awareness

Some forms of drama, such as Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, are specifically designed to encourage social and cultural activism and subvert political agendas (Boal, 1979). Boal's techniques have been employed worldwide to address power relations between diverse sociocultural groups. Boal also addresses theatre's ability to recognise sameness between people from vastly different cultural settings, asserting that 'they are all, like me, just human beings' (2002, p.2). This perspective is particularly relevant to the study, as the researchers utilised Boal's work as a basis to encourage culturally diverse students to both acknowledge and transcend their differences while recognising the power struggles they face (Wright, 2020). Likewise, Logie et al. (2021) integrated Theatre of the Oppressed techniques into discussions around sensitive topics to empower refugee youth in Uganda to take collective action against social issues. This process aligns with findings from Sloane and Wallin (2013), who noted that methods such as Forum Theatre and Image Theatre provided former refugee youth with opportunities to address community challenges collaboratively, enhancing their sense of belonging in a diverse group. Additionally, a case study by Carter and Sallis (2016) demonstrated the effectiveness of participatory storytelling in helping young people to view diverse cultures as valuable resources.

Building Ensemble

A second key feature of participating in drama is the potential for drama activities to build a sense of ensemble where participants work together, emphasising the success of the collective rather than the individual. Unsurprisingly, Ensemble theatre is often linked with democracy and democratic processes (Neelands, 2009) and is described by Kitchen (2020) as being closely linked to a sense of 'family' where participants are encouraged to think in 'socially hopeful' ways (2020, p.385). Understanding 'ensemble pedagogy' highlights the values of student diversity and democracy over the deficit models of class, race and culture sometimes enacted in educational contexts and was thus an important element of drama to consider in this study.

Relationships of Trust

A key feature of both friendship and drama is trust. In the context of the research, it has been established that trust is generally stronger within ethnic groups than between them (Rydgren et al., 2013). Therefore, it was an important area to consider. Research by Neelands and Nelson (2013) involving 18 ethnically diverse teenage students reported that all participants experienced increased feelings of trust, cooperation, altruism, and empathy after the completion of drama exercises and performances involving the entire ensemble. Underscoring the reciprocal relationship between trust and drama, Thorkelsdottir's more recent research found that drama skills can be strengthened through drama experiences that involve trusting relationships (2022).

Devising

More often than not, devising is a group activity that challenges the notion of the solitary creative artist (Mermikides & Smart, 2012, p.1); hence, it is significant to this study's focus on the relationality and collaborative nature of drama. The original creation of drama is linked with the context of people involved and the space in which it happens because in devising participants make visible the relationships between themselves and their situation (Perry et al., 2013). Devising is also a practice often linked with building a sense of democracy because it can "build community, and counter individualism" (Wessels, 2012, p.56). Hallewas (2019) builds on this idea in her devised theatre project, asserting that it can also catalyse young people to attempt to make social change.

As a tool for fostering community in drama education, devising is not, however, without its limitations. As Wessels (2011) highlights, the process is inherently shaped by the politically charged dynamics of silencing and privileging of speech. Particularly in drama contexts that demand sameness, certain voices may dominate while others remain marginalised, challenging the notion of a collaborative community. Gallagher (2007) emphasises that fostering a democratic drama community should begin with recognising difference and encourage the acceptance of conflict as a constructive element of devising. Similarly, Grady (2001) highlights the need to acknowledge and engage with the complex and diverse identities of youth theatre participants, ensuring that their unique perspectives inform and enrich the creative process. This work was particularly relevant to the social

justice goals of the authors' study, complementing Boal's (2002) view that, despite the depth of our differences, humans share a fundamental commonality.

Adolescent Peer Relationships

As our research dealt closely with friendship, a relationship that scholars have argued is one of the most important features of adolescence (Brown & Larson, 2009; Waldrip et al., 2008), it is important to highlight the factors that are believed to constitute 'quality' in friendship. In reviewing the literature, seven key features of culturally diverse friendship were identified and informed the study, including *trust* (Rawlins, 1992), *tolerance* (Carter & Sallis, 2016), *empathy* (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990), *communication* (Selfhout et al., 2009), *conflict resolution* (Burgos-Cienfuegos et al., 2015), *intercultural learning* (UNESCO World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996), and *sameness and difference* (Salas et al., 2018). Importantly, as the study progressed, the participants identified three further meaningful features of friendship: *familiarity, support and fun*. These ten features of culturally diverse friendship were analysed throughout the eight-week study and acted as markers analogous to the quality of participants' friendships.

Of further significance is drama's ability to build and mend adolescent relationships. O'Toole and Burton's (2009) longitudinal research into the role of process drama and forum theatre in managing bullying, for example, indicated significant changes in bullies' and bystanders' attitudes following their action research project, leading to some participants developing friendships with peers by whom they were initially intimidated.

Cultural Diversity

Culture is an important concept in this study but is understood differently by theorists. For example, Hall provides two seminal descriptions of culture and cultural identity. The first is "a collective 'one true self' … which many people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common", which presents cultural identity as largely fixed (Hall & Ghazoul, 2012, p.223). The second is "the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past", which alludes to a more changeable and communal concept

of self (Hall & Ghazoul, 2012, p.225). Our study drew on aspects of both definitions, as it concerned collective identity, the role of culture, and participant's personal narratives.

Cultural diversity is a concept that emphasizes the variety of cultural expressions and practices within a society, and our study highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing different cultural identities. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) provide a framework for understanding cultural diversity by outlining various positions that reflect differing values and perspectives on culture. In the context of this study, their analysis provided a tool for assisting our deep examination of how cultural diversity can enrich societies, as opposed to merely categorizing individuals into multicultural frameworks.

Ghassan Hage (2000) critiques a superficial appreciation of cultural diversity, particularly in the context of Australian society. He argues against the notion of 'White multiculturalism', which tends to celebrate cultural contributions without fostering genuine integration and understanding among diverse groups. Hage (2000, p.140) posits that "if we are diversity, there would be nothing to 'appreciate' and 'value' other than ourselves," suggesting that true cultural diversity requires more than acknowledgment; it necessitates active engagement and interaction among different cultural groups. This perspective is crucial for understanding how cultural diversity can lead to more meaningful social cohesion and mutual respect.

The implications of these discussions on cultural diversity were significant for our study, which involved participants from various cultural backgrounds, including both minority and dominant cultural groups in Australia. By focusing on cultural diversity, we can explore how different cultural identities interact, influence one another, and contribute to a richer societal fabric. This approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play in culturally diverse settings, moving beyond mere coexistence to fostering genuine intercultural dialogue and collaboration.

Summary

While many articles discussing the weight of cultural diversity in the education system were available, none explicitly stressed peer relationships as a starting point for developing richer intercultural connections in adolescence. Consequently, we identified that more research was needed into the ways that an adaptable drama education

program could influence the quality of peer relationships in culturally diverse, secondary school-aged students, and in this case with a focus on growing tolerance, empathy, communication, conflict resolution, intercultural learning, sameness and difference.

Consequently, the focus of our study was to devise and enact a series of drama workshops with adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds while exploring the development of their friendships through artistic and pedagogical processes.

Process of Inquiry

This research investigated culturally diverse adolescent peer relationships through eight workshops conducted over three months. It had ethical approval by Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval 2019/108) and participants provided informed consent. The fieldwork was conducted at a community centre in a suburb where a vast majority of residents' parents were born overseas, reflecting the cultural diversity of the centre's attendees. The centre itself is neighboured by an African grocer and a Multicultural Services Centre. A jovial cartoon mural that fittingly features two men, one Black and one white, arm-in-arm, grinning, is painted across a nearby shopfront.

The study involved 40 young people from 11 different cultures: 13 from South Sudan, two from Turkey, two from Burundi, three Australian of European descent, seven Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, one from Afghanistan, six from Ethiopia, one from Liberia, one from Somalia, one from Japan and three from Uganda. At the commencement of the workshops, we observed a range of relationships between the 8-22-year-old participants, most of whom were somewhat familiar with the other attendees but did not know their names or basic information. The group had a small number of close friendships and family relations. This was significant as we noted the variations in the potential for friendship development in those who did not consider themselves to be 'friends' with anyone in the group, versus those who already possessed a strong bond.

A qualitative methodology, drawing both on action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2012) and case study (Yin, 2009), was used to explore the social relationships of participants. At its core, action research is the "pursuit of practical solutions…and the flourishing of

individual persons and their communities" (Reason & Bradbury, 2012, p.14). This standpoint was imperative to the study design considering our aim to provide a relational drama experience that would, first and foremost, benefit the participants. Models of action research work towards transforming social inequalities through collective action and diverse ways of knowing (Lykes & Hershberg, 2012). The perspectives of participants were key to the decision-making processes within the study and the practical recommendations of the research.

The case study approach intended to capture the complexities of participant relationships in detail within their context (Yin, 2009). Case studies explore a real-life, bounded system (Alpi & Evans, 2019); in our case, the study was bounded by the specific context of the community centre and the group of culturally diverse young people who attended the centre for the weekly arts program. Focusing on this specific setting and group, as opposed to investigating relationship development through drama education more generally allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' interactions and experiences. For example, we considered minute changes in participant hand gestures, laughter, and eye contact as small but salient indicators of relationship development, and in turn, were able to provide 'thick' descriptions of these nuances (Taylor & Thomas-Gregory, 2015).

The research also drew on feminist theory, which aims to create social change and represent human diversity (Reinharz, 1992). Specifically, this meant questioning the existing dominant intellectual paradigms of research and placing high value on the voices and experiences of participants (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004), allowing for marginalised participants to generate knowledge and theories with these voices informing the path of the study (Harding, 2020).

Informed by the literature on elements of drama that appeared most promising in both the development of friendships and drama skills, eight workshops were developed consisting of drama exercises based on relationships of trust, storytelling, building ensemble, role, focus, voice and movement, and devising. Activities ranged from theatre sports and improvisation activities to storytelling and Theatre of the Oppressed performances (Boal, 1979), all of which encompassed one or more of the key drama exercises.

Data were collected through researcher observations documented in the research journal, and two focus groups, one held during the first workshop and the other following the culminating workshop. Finally,

the research outcomes were presented through a series of narrative portraits (Rodriguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). These portraits included both verbatim quotes from the participants and narrative portrayals of participant experiences.

Rashad's experiences lead these narratives. Rashad, an 11-year-old boy from South Sudan, was reserved at times throughout the project, but keen to participate at others. His story is presented as a composite narrative that incorporates the experiences of several other participants. While composite narratives are "useful and accessible to those outside academia" (Willis, 2019, p. 471), we acknowledge their limitation in conveying accurate depictions of the affect and beliefs of those represented. We deliberated this approach and ultimately found it beneficial in conveying the diverse and shared aspects of the lived experiences and expressions of the participants (Eastmond, 2007); however, we acknowledge the highly subjective nature of our roles in the interpretation of participant communications. What Rashad's composite story revealed was emblematic of change from an initial lack of connection with any other participants to a developing sense of friendship as the workshops progressed.

Emergent Findings

This study sought to explore how experiences of drama may affect culturally diverse friendships, and specifically examine which drama practices and experiences might develop friendships. The model of culturally diverse friendship informing the study focused on ten dimensions: *trust, tolerance, empathy, communication, conflict resolution, intercultural learning, sameness and difference, familiarity, fun* and *support.*

Throughout the study, we observed that certain drama experiences potentially affected participant friendships more than others. In reflecting on the way that many of the exercises used in the workshops related across these ten dimensions, the research revealed that those drama activities that focused primarily on *building ensemble, relationships of trust,* and *devising* appeared to have the most significant impact on features of friendship.

We focus specifically on these now and highlight the developmental trajectory of the participants' relationships with one another, revealed here through narrative portraits that illustrate

changes in participant friendships through three phases of research: introductory workshops, medial workshops, and culminating workshops.

Building Ensemble

Rashad didn't hear which exercise the class was preparing to undertake, but he didn't seem comfortable enough to interrupt the conversations of his peers to ask. As he considered slinking away from the group, a tall boy looked across the circle at Rashad, quietly asking his neighbour, 'Should we see if that guy over there needs a chair?'

Rashad risked a slight smile in the boy's direction. Rashad thought he might be from South Sudan, like himself.

'Want to sit with us?' the tall boy's neighbour asked Rashad, gesturing to a chair nearby.

'Sure,' Rashad blurted back, immediately looking back down. He shuffled over.

'What are we meant to do?' Rashad asked.

'We're playing 'All Those Who'. You have to move chairs if you answer yes to the leader. Say your name before talking if you end up in the middle,' one of the boys explained as a rambunctious Jacquie raced into the middle of the circle, volunteering as leader.

'My name's Jacquie and… Who has a brother?' Jacquie squealed.

The chairs surrounding her shook. Half the group stood and ran to the opposite side of the circle. Rashad remained rooted to his seat. He had two brothers, so knew he was supposed to move, but he was overwhelmed by the pushing and yelling. A small group of people were shouting in a language he didn't understand while vying for space on a singular chair.

The tall boy now stood awkwardly in the middle of the circle and muttered, 'My name is Sol, and I want to know who's been to

Europe.' Again, a handful of the teens sprang up, diving for empty chairs, shrieking loudly. Rashad had never been to Europe. He stayed put.

'Hey! You haven't even moved yet!' came Jacquie's cry. Rashad glanced up at her.

'You're cheating. You must move chairs if something applies to you.'

Rashad looked to his new peer, Sol, for support. Sol shrugged.

In Rashad's story, an ensemble-building activity is described. The narrative reflects six areas of culturally diverse friendship that were either not present or not well developed at the beginning of the workshops: familiarity, communication, conflict resolution, trust, tolerance, and intercultural learning. When the project commenced, participants exhibited and described varying levels of familiarity with one another. Many did not know any of the other participants' names, nor basic information about their peers and cultures.

Visible in this illustrative example, communication during ensemble building activities such as 'All Those Who' was at times reduced to shouting. Rather than aiming to resolve conflict through positive communication and problem-solving, participants would ignore one another or make harsh comments in retaliation, such as when Jacquie's lack of trust in Rashad resulted in her accusations of cheating. Jacquie was not accepting nor tolerant of Rashad's actions and did not allow him to explain his choices.

As the project went on, and activities focused on *building ensemble* were undertaken, familiarity, communication, conflict resolution, trust, tolerance, and intercultural learning began to develop. The following narrative portrait outlines one of the ensemble-building activities and the development of these six friendship features.

Rashad impatiently waited for Sol to arrive. He'd taken an earlier bus than usual to arrive a few minutes before their workshop started, hoping to discuss a recent South Sudanese football game with Sol. As Rashad had suspected, Sol was also from South Sudan. Rashad sat near the door, saving a chair next to him for

Sol and Sol's friend, Omar. The two boys eventually walked in while Tahnee explained an exercise called 'Circle of Knots', from a few weeks earlier. The football update would have to wait until after the activity.

Rashad moved with Sol and Omar to form a small group. They all joined hands, then tried to detangle themselves, with the aim of arranging themselves back into a perfect circle without letting go of one another.

After several minutes of moving in all directions, the group still resembled a knot, rather than a circle. Some students wanted to let go of one another and give up, while others were adamant they could succeed. Seeing a stalemate, Sol, the tallest of the group, suggested a new approach. He asked everyone to crouch down while he stood on his toes, gaining a clearer view of their predicament. Sol then instructed Rashad, "If you go under Omar's arm, that will help.'

Rashad ducked as Omar lifted his arm high. A space opened, and the circle began to reform. Jacquie, who had been vocal about abandoning the activity minutes before, whooped, 'Nice one!'

Omar simultaneously suggested, 'Sol, why don't you step over Rashad's arm?'

In this example it is possible to see changes in the developing friendships of the participants by the end of the workshops based on building ensemble. Participants became familiar with names and cultural information about their peers, enabling more effective communication. Rather than using vague language, such as 'that guy over there', participants communicated directly, using each other's names.

Following conversations about tolerance during our ensemble building workshops, participants appeared slower to anger during activities that introduced tension, such as 'Circle of Knots' and 'All Those Who'. We observed, for example, the formation of more trusting relationships reflected in fewer accusations of cheating. Following our ensemble building workshops, it was heartening to hear Sol remark

that 'Drama is good because we act out our everyday life to other people. Drama is a way to impress or act this out on other people and [a way of] communicating'. Sol raised the idea of 'performing' culture as an "unfolding performative invention" (Tulloch, 1999, p.5). His description of drama as a tool to illustrate one's culture to those outside it was a pertinent finding of the study.

The more direct communication and greater tolerance of the participants intersected with their ability to resolve minor conflicts, such as the group's disagreement about persisting with or abandoning the Circle of Knots activity by way of example. Rather than pushing and shouting about their conflicting views as they had in early workshops, participants learnt to pause and consider new paths towards mutually agreeable solutions, managing their emotions and de-escalating potentially explosive situations (Ntawiha et al., 2022).

Activities associated with building relationships of trust similarly appeared to reflect changes to participants' friendships throughout the eight workshops, as outlined in the following narrative portrait.

Relationships of Trust

Asked to form teams, Rashad's eyes flicked from group to group. He'd talked to a few kids before, but he still wasn't sure who to trust. Should he slip silently into the group of older boys who looked friendly but unfamiliar? Or approach the younger group of girls whose bright dresses matched their boisterous behaviour? Sol appeared in the opposite corner, looking equally thrown. They wandered awkwardly towards one another, looking for a familiar face to join them. A small, shy boy, whom Rashad knew to be South Sudanese like him, walked in their direction, and they finally had their group.

Tahnee explained that they would use a Theatre Sports exercise called 'Space Jump', which would require them to trust each other to develop 'offers' to move the plot of their improvisation along. Rashad quietly groaned to himself; he hated being the centre of attention but knew that he would have to enter the circle to perform at some point.

Rashad's upper lip was covered in a sheen of sweat by the time it was his turn to join in the act. Jacquie was frozen in the shape of a

> *galloping horse in the circle, and Rashad frantically wracked his brain for some way to contribute to a new storyline based on her posture. Precious seconds passed, with Jacquie's face becoming more annoyed as they did. Jacquie's friend, another Ethiopian girl, sighed loud enough for Rashad to hear, 'Just think of something.'*

Rashad and his peers exemplified a lack of trust, support, fun, and conflict resolution skills in the weeks prior to the trust-building workshops, during the introductory and medial phases of the workshops. When given the opportunity to choose partners or groups, they tended to move in cultural cliques, perhaps indicating a lack of engagement with the friendship features of intercultural awareness and a lack of appreciation of sameness and difference between cultures. During workshops, Tahnee reminded participants that one of the intentions of our exercises was to build trust through making and accepting offers (Johnstone, 1981); a tool that requires all participants to accept and embrace others' contributions.

In the early phases of the fieldwork, this type of side-coaching (Spolin, 1999) was common, indicating perhaps that the group needed some guidance in conflict resolution skill development and creating a supportive environment. In response, we incorporated conflict resolution and support building into the project discussions and activities. We also encouraged participants to 'branch out' and work with those they had not yet met, particularly when discussing topics related to participants' cultures.

Rashad and his peers required significantly less side-coaching from Tahnee in later weeks of the study, as evident in the following narrative portrait about the culminating workshops. It was time for Rashad to share his story. He had been too nervous to contribute anything in the previous week's workshop on storytelling, but he had a moving story he now felt safe enough to share. He'd chatted to the group of intimidating Ethiopian girls a few times now, and discovered that they were football fans, just like him. Even though they could be overexcited sometimes, they were okay by him because of their love of the 'best sport in the world', a point of connection. He was eager to tell them his story.

> *'I was fast asleep the night the fire started, but the haze of smoke must have woken me up. I ran into my parents' room, panicked. At*

first, I thought our house was the one on fire. But once my dad rushed us out to the street, I could see the flames licking the windowsills of my neighbour's home. I remember how piercing the sirens were in the silence of our cul-de-sac. They were too late, though. I never got to see our neighbour again.'

While some shocked faces gazed up at Rashad from the audience, there was also applause, and someone yelled, 'Rashad, do you need a hug?' Sol raised his eyebrows and gave him a thumbs up, checking that Rashad was okay.

Throughout the eight-week program, trust-based tasks appeared to influence the friendships of Rashad and his peers in several ways. The workshops on relationships of trust affected the participants' conflict resolution skills, intercultural learning, and experiences of fun and support. They provided opportunities for participants to discuss their cultural similarities and differences. They also appeared to develop more trusting relationships. Evident through participants' verbal and non-verbal communication with one another, the young people became less reserved in each other's presence and more willing to converse with those they had not previously befriended, including people outside of their culture. We also observed how the presence of cultural cliques diminished, and participants found ways to support the risks their peers took in trust-based activities.

Empathy and communication skills appeared to develop following activities based on devising drama, as did participants' feelings of support, their intercultural knowledge, and their understanding of sameness and difference. These friendship features are explored in the following narrative portrait in terms of the devising activities that assisted in their progress throughout the workshops.

Devising

Rashad reluctantly joined the brainstorm that was taking place about daily issues his group faced, which they would eventually turn into tableaux. He felt too tired to contribute. Someone had just mentioned homework, which was met with nods and mumbled agreement. Bringing a silent Rashad into the conversation, a pre-teen girl with straight blonde hair, who he now knew as Rachel, asked, 'Didn't you say you hate getting the bus, Rashad?'

'Yeah, it's the worst. People stare at me, and I never have enough money on my transit card.'

The group burst into chatter.

'Man, public transport is so annoying!'

'Right? I can't wait to get my license.'

The group scribe wrote 'public transport' on their brainstorming sheet. Rashad felt encouraged by the group's acceptance of his idea. He continued.

'Someone pushed me off my seat on the train once because they thought I'd touched their backpack.'

'Should we say public transport is a pressing issue, then?' the scribe asked.

What we were able to see in this story was that devising drama "contests the model of the singular creative artist" (Mermikides & Smart, 2012, p.1), significant to this study's focus on the collaborative nature of drama. This narrative reflects that the activities we facilitated in the realm of devising seemingly influenced participants' communication skills, shows of support and empathy, intercultural learning, and understanding of 'common ground' or sameness.

The empathetic dialogue of Rashad's peers during the devising exercises demonstrated their understanding of his experiences and their concern for his safety (Singer & Lamm, 2009). Devising tableaux based on shared concerns allowed participants to unite in discussion of their commonalities. Following the devised performance workshops, one participant noted that her favourite part of being in the audience was, 'learning about a different culture.' Considering the importance of intercultural learning in culturally diverse friendship development (Theobald, 2016), devising drama was a positive step in developing friendships within this project.

Conclusion

The project's findings provided insights into the role that drama education can play in young people's understanding of their peers and themselves. In the words of Zina, the program coordinator at the community centre, 'The kids have learnt to appreciate friendships... Some of them had issues getting along, and we really didn't know how to help them, but this has… They're not trying to impress you; they just are better friends now.' Interactions between participants and data collected in focus groups throughout the eight-week drama program indicate improvements in participants' senses of trust, support, tolerance, empathy, familiarity with other participants, and fun, following their engagement in drama activities that centred on building ensemble, forging relationships of trust, and working collaboratively to devise original performances.

The research helped make visible the ways that drama can promote positive relationships, improved conflict resolution and communication skills, and a greater understanding of participants' cultures. Diversities and commonalities within the group were explored in meaningful ways, with the identification of similarities encouraging social cohesion and decreasing cultural cliques. While other possible explanations for the social growth demonstrated by the participants certainly exist, the role drama played during the eight workshops appeared to affect participants friendships positively.

Drama's likely role in developing these relationships is perhaps due to the potential for drama to enable dual and simultaneous learning (Piazzoli & Kennedy, 2014). Drama is unique in its ability to encourage metaxis, the focus on one's performance as well as the world within the performance (Boal, 1995). Participants, for example, simultaneously learned drama skills while teaching one another about their unique cultural backgrounds and beliefs; they experienced drama education and intercultural learning concurrently.

These findings support the study's central aim of exploring how drama education affects friendships between diverse young people. The features of drama that framed the study acted as a collaborative pathway to friendship for the young people involved. What this drama pathway reflected is the intimate nature of the activities within the areas of ensemble and trust building, and devising, as well as the reinforcement of basic knowledge, such as names, ages, and family status about each participant within the group in an enjoyable setting.

The participants themselves stated that they felt closest to one another when they were having fun and when they were learning to work together cohesively rather than, for example, performing a solo scene to the group.

This study highlights the role that a drama education program can have in nurturing the social development of the artists of the future, and recommends further research into the intersections between drama education and culturally diverse adolescent relationships. The research also clarified the complex, interconnected nature of drama, culture, and friendship. We recognise, importantly, that each does not exist in a vacuum and are best explored as overlapping, intertwined concepts of equal importance.

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