Editorial

Janinka Greenwood

Our daily news are increasingly filled with stories of violence and discord. It prompts us to think about what we really need in our education system and processes. We need ways of enabling our children and young people to think critically about what they hear and see and be able to consider differing positionalities without feeling the need to give blind allegiance to any of them. We need to equip them with strategies for talking about their differences without fighting over them. We need to allow them to discover ways of collaborating and reconciling conflicts. We also need to support them in developing their own identity at the same time as they grow in awareness of and respect for the identity of others. While these needs are not automatically fulfilled by ‘doing drama’, it has repeatedly been argued that the strategies of working through strategically selected drama processes potentially provide space for these kinds of learning. At a time when our education policy increasingly focuses on and funds the development of literacy and numeracy, we also need to ensure we keep offering interactive and complex learning fields like drama and that we make those fields rich in enabling students to explore what it means to be human and to live with others in a complex and very divided world.

The eight articles in this volume explore some of the potential richnesses of teaching with and through drama. They are written by practitioners from New Zealand and overseas. Once again it is the privilege of our journal to host the work of experienced and thoughtful artists and teachers from around the world: this time from Canada, Israel, Greece and the Czech Republic respectively. Their work in this journal allows us to find parallels and challenges in their practice and it affirms that while we live in island spaces we are not alone in our search to better understand and continuously develop our purpose and practice. At the same time it is a joy to have received explorations of practice from our own New Zealand practitioners. Collectively their individual voices become a sort of polylogue: a stream of discussion about what drama means and what we can do with it.

Molly Mullen and Rod Wills report a performing arts project which examined and re-storied disability. Their account is provocative and narratively absorbing as well as scholarly in its presentation of the events of the project and of the unresolved issues embedded in our ways of understanding and engaging with disability. Their reflective account will be of interest not only to drama practitioners but to teachers and community activists who work with disabled people.

Larry O’Farrell shares a keynote presentation he gave in Bogotá in 2015. Beginning with a speculation that arts education may be as old as education itself, he reviews the range of arts education practices to be found around the world. He examines trends, approaches and perspectives and troubles the apparent opposition between arts as tools that may be used for learning purposes and arts as self-standing cultural artefacts. His discussion offers us a framework in which we can each place our own approach to practice within a panorama of other perspectives and priorities.
Jane Luton captures key moments from her doctoral research project in which she engaged six international drama educators to embody their stories. Hers was a doctorate in which she performed her research, and this article transforms moments of performance into words on the page. In the role of Archivist’s Assistant she crystallises obstacles and tensions in her experts’ experiential stories. And in doing so, she offers a challenging and alluring alternative to traditional research investigation and writing.

Asterios Tsiaras examines classroom practice in a Greek primary school in which performing arts processes are used to teach poetry. A quantitative analysis of teachers’ and students’ reactions to such use of drama found that teachers believed their students gained deeper aesthetic appreciation of both poetry and drama and that students gained confidence in approaching poetry, understood it better and enjoyed the experience. The article provokes comparison to New Zealand experiences.

Shifra Schonmann challenges us to examine the purpose of performing theatre with young people in our schools. She examines a number of metaphor constructs of the culture of schools and uses them to examine the power relations that operate within education. What then is the role of school performances, she asks? How does the school play relate to young people’s development of agency? And how does participation contribute to students’ overall school acceptance and achievement? She challenges us to think beyond the ‘frill’ of the school play and consider it in terms of its artistic-aesthetic, pedagogical-educational, and sociological-cultural aspects.

Veronika Rodová report on a series of history lessons in a Czech Republic classroom in which students studied ancient Egypt and in which the teacher utilised the making of still pictures, or freeze frames, to allow students to physically and imaginatively enter the alien world of the antique and perhaps initially irrelevant past. As well as reporting the process of the work, she offers a comprehensive scholarly examination of the relationship between drama visual images and learning that invites reflection on New Zealand practice.

Tracey-Lynne Cody draws associations between the pedagogical practices of several expert New Zealand drama teachers and the expectations of New Zealand policy and curriculum, especially those that call for culturally responsive pedagogy. She explores how the establishment of effective ensemble cultures resembles that development of whanaungatanga in the classroom. She identifies five key practices utilised by these drama teachers in developing strong operational classroom ensembles and relates these to the values of the core curriculum and to current research about cultural responsiveness.

Janinka Greenwood shares an exploratory theoretical paper she presented at the 2105 IDIERI conference. She explores some of the possibilities of arts-based research and reports on a workshop in Prague which involved a serendipitous encounter between Czech and Bangladeshi teachers. She uses the events in the workshop and photographs from the journey to the workshop to play with latencies, texts, sub-texts and silences and to suggest ways that drama, and other arts, may allow us to explore ideas, tensions, discoveries and spaces that lie beyond the limitations of our words.

Our journal is a relatively small one on the global stage. We manage just one issue a year, and we do so on a shoestring, and with lots of good will. As editor I acknowledge that sometimes the task seems overwhelming, but I also know, as do my colleagues, how important it is for us to have a national journal in our field. It allows us to share our voices, and provides a platform for our collaborative professional development. It provokes us to articulate why we do what we do and what we hope to achieve. It allows us to participate in international dialogues about performing arts and education and to bring international ideas back to our own local ground of practice. As you read the voices in this issue, therefore, please think about what you might like to share in our coming issues from your practice, research and reflection.