

Language in and around the dramatic curriculum

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After office hours, Mrs De Soto moulded a tooth of pure gold and polished it. 'Raw with salt, indeed', muttered Doctor De Soto. 'How foolish to trust a fox!' 'He didn't know what he was saying', said Mrs De Soto. 'Why should he harm us? We're helping him.' 'Because he's a fox!' said Doctor De Soto. 'They're wicked, wicked creatures.' That night the De Sotos lay awake worrying. 'Should we let him in tomorrow?' Mrs De Soto wondered. 'Once I start a job', said the dentist firmly, 'I finish it. My father was the same way.' 'But we must do something to protect ourselves', said his wife. They talked and talked until they formed a plan. 'I think it will work', said Doctor De Soto. A minute later he was snoring. (Steig 1982)¹

The dentist in William Steig's children's story, *Dr De Soto*, is a rodent who refuses to treat animals dangerous to mice. In a moment of weakness, the Doctor and his wife decide to extract a tooth from a dapper, but devious fox. Under the influence of gas, the fox dreamily voices his plans for the De Sotos' ultimate demise: '*M-m-m, yummy*', he mumbled. '*How I love them raw ... with just a pinch of salt and a ... dry ... white wine.*' Professional courtesy turns to fear in the face of such a threat, and the De Sotos spend a worrisome night wondering how they will be able to insert a new gold tooth without self sacrifice.

Although the De Sotos are fictional mice in a fantasy world, they also live in a world of dilemmas and decisions—a place of problems, plans and personal performance that has much in common with the real world. There is no outside evaluator to tell them how they are doing. They must discuss together and decide well or face the consequences. Language arts classrooms, too, can be places for discussion, decision making and collaborative problem solving for authentic performance (Heath 1990), but too often they focus on a curriculum of separate and teachable components whose talk and task structures centre on low-level skills and isolated procedures (Hiebert and Fisher 1991). A diminished curriculum is common in classrooms of school-labelled 'remedial' readers (Rowan and Guthrie 1989), particularly those children who are labelled because of non-English, non-mainstream backgrounds (Shepard 1991). In contrast with the segregated and overly simplified curriculum usually offered, some educators (e.g., Bidwell 1990, Bolton 1984, Courtney 1986, Edmiston *et al.* 1987, Wolf 1993, 1994) argue for informed and sensitive uses of drama for such labelled children.

This paper stems from a year-long study of a multicultural urban

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classroom of third and fourth grade school-labelled 'remedial' students and their teacher as they incorporated classroom theatre into their language arts curriculum with the help of a professional theatre director. As defined here, *classroom theatre* is a blend of creative drama and readers' theatre that ultimately has much in common with regular theatre. While creative drama stresses a process-orientated, non-performance, improvisational approach, readers' theatre represents a prepared performance with scripted text (Landy 1982). Classroom theatre takes and reshapes the best from both worlds—offering children opportunities to (a) participate in theatre games to exercise their voices and bodies as well as build concentration, and (b) collaboratively produce theatrical interpretations of selected scenes in published texts.

The benefits traditionally seen to derive from drama in education are oral interpretation and public speaking (McCaslin 1990, Wagner 1991). Yet, the *language in the drama*—learning to modulate the voice to create character and find convincing expression for an outside audience—need not be limited to what is accomplished verbally. Other communication systems and symbols—gesture, eye gaze, artistic design—play their role in enhancing, extending and even replacing what can be communicated orally. Furthermore, since classroom theatre includes opportunities for scripting, costume and set design, expansion of gestures and communication between characters, then the *language around the drama* is equally critical. This language is marked by negotiation between players, analytical talk about characters signifying intention and motivation, hypothetical statements inherent to problem solving, and self-assessment as actors evaluate their choices.

In the story of *Dr De Soto*, much of the talk that surrounds the characters' actions is unspoken, but implied. Steig (1982) tells us that the mice 'talked and talked until they formed a plan' to outfox the fox. In this paper, however, the talk that both swirls in and around the drama plays a more audible role. Here, I listen carefully to the negotiations, decisions, intonations and symbolic communications of three children—Bart, Stella and Tomás—as they stage a play of *Dr De Soto*. The data reveal that children immersed in drama integrate personal knowledge with collaborative problem solving and continual evaluation as they prepare, practise and perform their play. The language both in and around their drama reveals what Resnick and Resnick (1992: 38) call the 'new basics of thinking, reasoning, and learning how to learn'.

I begin this paper with a discussion of the dramatic curriculum in theory and then turn to the roles, routines and research method of the study. Next, I move to the dramatic curriculum in practice, exploring the results of the children's language both in and around the drama. In the final discussion, I provide specific comments on the potential for drama in classrooms as well as some general cautions concerning the challenge and necessity of curricular change.

The dramatic curriculum in theory

For far too long, drama, if done at all, has been relegated to the later hours of the school day or to special programmes for the gifted and talented. Drama

is even more distanced from children who have not learned to read and write on the same schedule as their classmates. Instead, these children are typically offered a slowed-down, piecemeal curriculum of 'planned fragmentation' (Allington 1991), which gets increasingly disjointed as children are pulled out of regular classrooms and placed into other situations. Drama, as is true of all the arts, remains linked to intuition and emotion – a process deemed too mysterious to hold a major place in the school's curriculum (Gardner 1989). It is also considered superfluous for children who need large doses of the 'basics'.

Yet, drama is less tied to the 'magic' of fantasy worlds than to the continual cognitive activity of the real world. As Courtney (1990: 26) explains: 'Dramatic activity mostly produces a change in how we understand the deep rather than the surface level of meaning'. And to get to the deep levels of meaning, classroom theatre offers a curriculum that brings children together with text, with each other, and with other ways of making meaning in the world in the context of a long-term project and final performance.

The focus on text in classroom theatre comes from a critical need to connect children and books. Children who are labelled as 'at risk' for school failure often view reading as the enemy. They are taught through continual recitation patterns and evaluative questions (Mehan 1978) that there is a single, correct answer either held in the mind of the teacher or in the teacher's manual that they must match. Yet, much of what we now understand about the interrelationship of reader and text suggests that a creative understanding of text comes when the reader travels through a character or situation as deeply as possible, while keeping sight of personal experience (Bakhtin 1986). While understanding is uniquely situated in the individual, reading also implies an ability to shift roles and voices and take on the perspective of others. Similar understandings of the interpretation of text occur in theoretical writings on drama that emphasize the actor's ability to take on the roles of others *through* the role of self (Stanislavski 1949). The latter may veer from the text, yet more often there are critical points of intersection where meaning is made in the dialogue between text and self.

A second key to classroom theatre is the emphasis on the collaborative construction of interpretation through careful guidance. Current cognitive science research (e.g., Resnick 1987) emphasizes contextual prerequisites in modelling and scaffolding to enable students of all cultural backgrounds to gain control over a wide range of analytical processes to support individual and social explorations of meaning. As the classroom opens the door on to multiple perspectives, ways of working with text must be explicitly modelled (Delpit 1988), unpacking and illuminating the discourse processes and conceptual analyses that communicate interpretation. Teachers thus guide children to demonstrate their thinking to others and to see problem solving in and through the text. However, one of the limitations in current interpretations of the social-constructionist view (e.g., Rogoff 1990) is the pre-eminence of the adult or 'expert' as a guide for the child. Just as in the theatre actors learn from each other, not just from the director, so in classroom theatre, children learn from each other as well as their teacher or director. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that children often learn from more

capable peers in the 'zone of proximal development', but more emphasis on the multidirectional and ever-shifting nature of learning relationships is seen in classroom theatre. This expansion from teacher as single model to include other children as models and co-interpreters in the reading classroom stresses the importance of having diverse perspectives and multiple repertoires of language uses in the same classroom. Moreover, in this expanded vision, diverse perspectives, talents and frames of experience of children from different cultures in the classroom will not only be respected, but also seen as enhancement.

A third key to classroom theatre is the emphasis on non-verbal communication. While there is much emphasis on the *word* as the realization of thought, Vygotsky (1978) also credited other symbolic systems, particularly gesture. He saw possibilities in children's dramatic play when he reconstructed earlier studies in which children were asked to describe pictures. Vygotsky asked the children to make their descriptions in pantomime and found that reliance on verbalized perceptions failed to capture the rich interpretation that children could communicate through movement. Thus, complete reliance on verbalization can give a skewed perception of the reader's response, for meaning is not completely dependent on speech (Wolf and Heath 1992). Instead, meaning is discovered in movement, sights and sounds and can be created through dance, drama, art, music and play. Thus, some researchers (Dyson 1990, Hickman 1983, Paley 1981) argue that the child must be allowed to have more than one avenue of expression, for children often have responses to literature that are not always based in language. The ability to present knowledge reflectively in alternative dimensions, such as movement, art and music, benefits non-mainstream/non-native English-speaking children as well as mainstream students since not all cultures place the stress on verbal displays of knowledge that schooling has come to see as 'normal' (Cazden 1988). Stanislavski (1961) stressed the importance of communicating the subtext, or the meaning underneath the lines of text, through movement. He believed that the actor's interpretation depended not only on an analysis of the inner life of the play, but on the external physical action that accompanied the words and demonstrated meaning to the audience.

A final key to classroom theatre is the structure of a long-term project which helps children develop their text interpretations over time and culminates in a final performance for parents and peers. The gradual build up of understandings about the workings and requirements of the theatre, the attention to planning, the constant negotiation, and the critiques by self, peers and adults of work in progress all combine to immerse children in the day-to-day activities of the theatre. The final performance is a culminating display of the work, energy, planning and thinking that occurred over weeks of rehearsal. Preparation and performance act in partnership to create 'curricular coherence' (Allington 1991) as children work carefully and comprehensively towards tangible goals. The ultimate presentation, unlike a test, displays the group's understandings rather than individual interpretations. To be sure, a performance involves risk. But, if we know anything about literacy we know that it involves risk—striking out towards independence by offering opinions, calling on background knowledge,

making connections and growing into new learning. For far too long in remedial classrooms we have protected children against risk (Dweck and Bempechat 1983), perhaps because we feel that they are 'at risk' already. Yet, classroom theatre creates a context where children are not 'at risk', but are 'actually—like all our students—children of promise' (Heath and Mangiola 1991: 11).

Roles, routines and research method

The focal children in this study—Stella, Bart and Tomás—attended an ethnically diverse, urban US public school called Bayside Elementary. Their teacher, Natasha, led her children in round-robin reading—the traditional 'you read a page, I'll read a page' reading instruction found in many classrooms and often recommended in basal textbooks. She did not separate her small class of 17 children into ability reading groups, but rather provided whole-class instruction. Natasha suggested that her purposes in large-group instruction depended on a teaching philosophy that encouraged solidarity rather than segregation. The children designated for her class had been given every label the school system had—ESL (English as a Second Language), LEP (Limited English Proficient), LD (Learning Disability), RSP (Resource Specialist Program), Chapter I, and Title I—and their cumulative records showed myriad problems, both academic and emotional. Ordinarily these were the children that were pulled out for individual instruction, but with the restructuring of Bayside School, pull-out classes were eliminated, and Natasha, a teacher with an RSP credential and experience in working with emotionally disturbed children, was ostensibly given a 'regular', heterogeneous class.

The class mix became less and less heterogeneous, however, when the dual realities of federal regulations and teacher expectations came together to form Natasha's class list. Federal requirements for RSP students include specialized instruction provided by an RSP credentialed teacher.² Thus, RSP-designated children in third and fourth grade automatically went to Natasha. The rest of her class population was formed from those nominated by teachers, and, as teachers came together to form class lists for the following year, Natasha often got the children who were considered to exhibit behaviour problems. Though she fought hard for a more heterogeneous class, a school-wide expectation for the low level of her children combined with high confidence in Natasha's ability to 'handle problem children' ensured homogeneity instead. Of the fourth graders placed in her predominantly third grade class to balance the 'low' level, several had been retained, and two were described by Natasha as the 'lowest' children in her class.

One of these two children was Bart who had been at Bayside since kindergarten. Although his attendance record was 'excellent' and three different teachers labelled him as a 'good worker', Bart still experienced many difficulties in school. He was referred for testing in the first grade and given an RSP status. His mother was 'concerned' and 'co-operative' and readily agreed to testing and placements with specially trained teachers.

His first grade teacher characterized him as a 'delightful child—warm, considerate, friendly, happy, caring and co-operative' but his 'struggles with school subjects' caused her to retain him for another year in first grade. By the time he entered Natasha's fourth grade classroom, he was school-wise and turned off. 'Bart was almost a non-reader when he came in here', Natasha explained (7 May 1991). Bart had his own explanation. 'Reading's what flunked me' he said, associating reading with being 'uncool' (31 January 1991).

By the time Stella entered the fourth grade she had been in four schools, and her school reports showed an inconsistency in attendance. Her attendance record, in fact, was much the cause of her retention in second grade, for she had simply missed too much school to 'catch up' with the other children in her class. Stella's father was a carpenter and they often had to move owing to lay-offs in the construction business. Yet, like Bart, the school records showed a consistency in parent involvement and support. Stella's mother regularly attended conferences, volunteered in school, and approved the special testing and tutoring programmes designed to help her daughter. In our own interactions, Stella spoke of how often her mother read to her, and her own love of reading, though she was quick to stress that she enjoyed 'real books' not those found in her basal reader which she called 'those stupid books' (23 May 1991).

Tomás was barely in school before he was pegged as a loner who was 'very bright' but had 'low stamina'. He was retained in kindergarten, and at the end of his second go-round his teacher recommended that he be given special attention or he would be 'lost in the shuffle'. Tomás's mother was also noted for being very co-operative. On the advice of one teacher who suggested that Tomás needed 'to work harder on sitting appropriately on his chair during class and paying attention' his mother had a meeting with the school counsellor. Like Stella, Tomás read fluently and with good expression, but he still expressed negative feelings about reading in the classroom. While awaiting his turn to read, Tomás often stared into space or played with the small toys he brought from home. In his journal he explained his dissatisfaction: 'I don't like reading becaus it tocks [takes] to long To read and people yell and talk to much' (13 December 1990).

Part of the children's dissatisfaction stemmed from the round-robin reading instruction which took place in their classroom on a daily basis. While one child read a page, the other 16 children were left to their own devices. Although they were supposed to follow in their texts, most did not. Natasha began each story with discussion that allowed children to express their prior knowledge of particular subjects, but once the story was begun there was little time spent on prediction or interpretation. The continual press to move from page to page and story to story did not leave the children with any sense of immersion in text or opportunities to practise or revisit text. Bart described the system, explaining: 'All we do is read, read, read, read until we drop and die' (23 May 1991).

As a group, the children had high interest in drama and often invented plays and skits in their free time. Natasha affectionately described them as a class of 'hams' who loved getting up and performing (28 September 1990). The plays, however, involved very little planning. Several children would get

together, pick a topic (often involving media violence), and arrange for a time in front of the class. Most plots were devised on the spot and although many plays were appreciated by the class audience, others were derided by their peers. Sceptical statements like 'I don't get it!' and 'This is dumb' were often heard in response to performances. Still, the children continued in their enthusiasm for play-making in general, and when Bill, the classroom theatre director, came to their class they were enthusiastic participants.

Bill's dramatic curriculum centred on creativity, criticism and consistency. He conducted 10 classroom theatre sessions (from December to April) and each session followed a set routine. He began the class with a vocal warm-up (usually a tongue twister) to prepare the voice as well as a physical warm-up for the body. From there he moved to acting exercises to build the children's concentration, such as the 'mirror game' where one actor mirrors another's movements. Then the class turned to text interpretation: (a) reading a story, (b) making selective and analytical choices in transforming the story into a script through social negotiation, (c) formulating, practising and refining their interpretations, (d) performing for an audience, and (e) finally evaluating their performance and those of other children. Bill encouraged the children to think like actors, using the technical vocabulary of the theatre and the strategies of those on the stage—marking their scripts to note body movement and intonation, arranging for a prompter if needed, and running their lines repeatedly.

The first sessions were devoted to the preparation of short-time-only performances often from texts in the children's basal readers. Natasha wanted the children to use texts with which they were highly familiar. But during the early months of these sessions, I brought in a variety of trade books which Natasha or I either read to the class or offered in brief book talks. From the 25 books I brought, the children selected five books to interpret for a final performance for the school: *Who's in Rabbit's House?* (Aardema 1977), *The Five Chinese Brothers* (Bishop 1938), *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (McKissack 1988), *Tikki Tikki Tembo* (Mosel 1968), and *Dr De Soto* (Steig 1982). Classroom theatre sessions seven to nine were devoted to the preparation of scenes from these stories and in the tenth session the children performed for their parents and peers.

My own role in the study was one of active participant observation. As an observer, I collected data for this study twice each week throughout a full academic year, integrating fieldnotes with audio- and video-tape recording. I collected site documents (e.g., the participants' reflective writing, school records) as well as conducting several informal interviews with all study participants. I observed and recorded the children in both regular classroom reading instruction led by Natasha and the 10 formal classroom theatre sessions (from mid-December to mid-April) led by Bill. During the preparations for the final performance, I conducted formal interviews with all of the children regarding their interpretations of character and scene. After the performance, I also conducted formal interviews with teams of players—reviewing the performance video-tape with the children and asking them to analyse and evaluate their interpretative decisions. As a participant I followed Bill's lead in the classroom theatre sessions—helping children run through their lines, standing in for absent players, making suggestions and

offering encouragement and critique. I wrote and received a grant for the purchase of a collection of multicultural trade books for the classroom library as well as funds to support the purchase of costume and set materials that the children used to design and enhance their productions.

My analysis of fieldnotes, transcripts and artefacts centred on the features of language that marked problem solving and perspective shifting as well as the non-verbal supplements to verbal expression.³ Problem-solving features focused on the children's interpretative planning and included life-text comparisons, conditionals or hypotheticals, meta-narrative, queries of meaning and procedural talk. Perspective shifting concentrated on the children's immersion in character and included role flexibility, match of character's role with actor's traits, paralinguistic cues (e.g., intonation, pitch, rhythm and voice characterizations when, for example, players took on the gruff voice of an old man or the high-pitched tone of an anxious mother), and pronoun shifts. Non-verbal supplements highlighted the children's extralinguistic cues. Following Corsaro (1985: 47), these non-verbal behaviours included '(a) body movement and gross motor activity, (b) manipulations of physical objects, (c) eye contact, (d) facial expression, (e) gesture, and (f) body orientation'.

In my analysis of sufficient and triangulated data sources, I discovered key linkages or patterns of evidence to formulate and warrant my research assertions (Erickson 1986).⁴ Finally, in the writing of this paper, I tied narrative vignettes of the children's planning, practice and performance to the stories they enacted, for an additional data source was the literature itself.⁵

Thus, in this paper the tale of *Dr De Soto* (Steig 1982) weaves throughout the analytic tale of the children's interpretation, creating metaphorical links between the text on the page and that of the real world. Interpretative commentary frames each narrative vignette or transcript excerpt, providing both context for the scene to come, and analysis of its meaning and fit within the entire pattern.

The dramatic curriculum in practice

In this section, I focus on the dramatic curriculum as it plays itself out in practice. I begin with the language in the drama, looking at the 'text' of Bart, Stella and Tomás's final performance of *Dr De Soto* for an audience of school peers and family members. Next I turn to the language around the drama, analysing the 'subtext' of the multiple decisions they made prior to their performance as well as their reflections on the process after the curtain closed.

Language in the drama

The next morning, promptly at eleven, a very cheerful fox turned up. He was feeling not a particle of pain. When Doctor De Soto got into his mouth, he snapped it shut for a moment, then opened wide and laughed, 'just a joke!'

After their late evening of talk, the De Sotos come up with a marvellous plan. They affix the tooth and resolve their problems by offering the fox a unique

opportunity to avoid any further personal pain – a secret formula painted on each tooth which will rid the patient of toothaches forever. The fox quickly agrees and his teeth are painted with the formula. However, after he is told to hold his teeth together tightly for a full minute, he discovers that he cannot open his jaws. The joke is on the fox, for his teeth are glued together! The De Sotos smile victoriously as the fox stumbles away.

In the opening of the children's scene, Bart (as the fox) swaggered on to the classroom stage, his top hat tipped recklessly to the side. Tomás (as Dr De Soto) wore a white coat and was in the midst of organizing his 'instruments' (a child's toy doctor kit) when Bart entered. Tomás immediately began to pace back and forth, shooting nervous glances in Bart's direction. He then hid under the desks to create the effect of having disappeared into the fox's mouth. Bart pretended to snap his jaws shut and then chortled loudly at his own humour. But Tomás emerged from the desks and said '*Be serious*' in an authoritative 'get down to business' tone. After the operation, Bart ran his tongue over his teeth and exclaimed '*My it feels good, honey!*' Then he tucked his head down and lowered his voice to a stage whisper, '*I really shouldn't eat them. On the other hand, how can I resist? Ya!*' Later while applying the 'secret formula', Tomás painted Bart's fake fox teeth carefully with a paintbrush, while Bart leaned in to accommodate the process. Yet, when he realized that his teeth were stuck together, Bart leapt off the stool and turned in amazement to face the clever doctor and his wife. As Stella, who played both wife and narrator, read the lines, '*The fox was stunned. He stared at Doctor De Soto, then at his wife. They smiled, and waited*', she looked up from her script and joined Tomás in a heartfelt grin, their eyes, all the while, on Bart. The eye gaze, touch, tone and intonation all combined to join the characters in the time, space and relationships of the play. While Bart's eyes registered stunned disbelief, his actions and those of the successful De Sotos created a believable scene.

Each of the children leaned on the language in the play to communicate their character and scene. Very early in rehearsals, Bart began to add 'cocky' additions such as 'honey' and 'baby' to the end of his lines. He only added one or at most two words to the entire script and the additions appeared at different points in different rehearsals. In discussions with fellow players, he did not appear to have a fixed plan of where these additions should fall, only that they should be inserted at some point. In the final performance, however, he added the word 'honey' to his first line, and this addition, combined with his 'jive' tone, sent the entire audience into giggles. Their reaction seemed to trigger an alternative decision in Bart, for he then abandoned his more conservative plan of only one or two additions and instead added *six* new endings which included one 'baby', two uses of 'honey', and three supplementary expressions of either 'Ya!' or 'Ah!'. The audience went wild.

Through cocky endearments slurred carelessly over the tongue, Bart copped an attitude with his character – a fox who was sly and sinister but humorous as well. He also communicated his character through his chosen costume and the way he wore it. The red sports jacket was pushed back casually on his shoulders. The top hat Bart selected was of shining blue, with a bold red band. And he sported a small plastic mask – a nose and mouth with whiskers and gleaming canines. His physical movement sent communicative

messages as well—his swagger into the dentist's office and the dramatic change in personality as realized the effects of the De Sotos' plan. Bart's fox was totally played for laughs, and he exaggerated every move. At one point he clenched his teeth so tight and swung his head in such discomfort that he almost fell off the stool.

The character of the dentist was less dramatic, and Tomás played it accordingly. He adopted a professional air—though he did appear to be extremely nervous at first sight of the fox. He was thorough in his work, dipping his paintbrush into a small jar and painting each of Bart's long canines with care. His face was set in a serious expression, until he saw that his plan was a success and broke into a glorious grin. Stella, too, was more serious. She played the part of Mrs De Soto but had no character lines. Instead, she read all the narrator's lines, emphasizing the words with a slight increase in volume. After Tomás, her husband, succeeded in gluing the fox's teeth together, Stella read, '*The fox was stu::nned*' (19 April 1991) elongating the vowels with a musical lilt. Her choice emphasized a key word to show that the De Sotos' trick had worked, and her musical tone highlighted the pleasure of her character's success. Had she been able to express her character's inner thoughts, they would no doubt be striking a triumphant chord.

Language around the drama

'Be serious', said the dentist. 'We have work to do.'

When the fox playfully traps Dr De Soto in his jaws, the dentist reminds him of the serious nature of dental work. Similarly, throughout the sessions, Bill emphasized the serious nature of classroom theatre work. Reminding the children of their new role as actors, he taught them theatre rules and routines that would support their reflections and interpretations. The children's planning and rehearsal talk centred on three areas: language about the lines, language about set and costume design, and language about audience.

Language about the lines: The emphasis on being actors was a constant in Bill's dramatic curriculum. Often, when delivering an instructional point, he would remind the children of his own theatrical experience. This was particularly true as the children prepared their scripts, for Bill encouraged an analytical look at the lines of the text. Although Bill placed emphasis on following the author's words, in the scripting phase of their preparation he encouraged them to eliminate sections of the text that did not match their own interpretation or what they felt they could do as actors. The original text of Dr De Soto, for example, reads:

The fox was stunned. He stared at Doctor De Soto, then at his wife. They smiled, and waited. All he could do was say, 'Frank oo berry mush' through his clenched teeth, and get up and leave. *He tried to do so with dignity.* Then he stumbled down the stairs in a daze.

Doctor De Soto and his assistant had outfoxed the fox. *They kissed each other and took the rest of the day off.* (Steig 1982)

When Bart, Stella and Tomás went to work on their script they eliminated the two lines emphasized in the extract from the original text of *Dr De Soto*. The 'dignity' line was deemed antithetical to the fox as Bart wished to play him. In their play, Bart as fox literally stumbled and fell down the stairs, which gave him ample opportunity to play the clown and display a thoroughly demoralized fox. And both Tomás and Stella agreed that the last line had to go. Even less threatening alternatives such as 'they hugged each other' were rejected. 'No way', Stella declared, regarding Tomás with disdain. 'I ain't gonna touch him!' (8 March 1991).

Bill also demonstrated how he, as an actor, decided on points of stress, and marked them in his script to serve as a reminder of the decisions he had made:

Bill: But you really need to concentrate, first of all, on just sitting down and going over those words together. And then maybe—and I very often do this in my own scripts when I'm acting in a play—I take the script and I find out how I want to read a particular thing and if I want to emphasize one word. If I really want to make that stronger with my voice, I underline it. Or maybe I highlight it in a different colour or something or I draw a circle around it. (8 March 1991)

Bill's explanations served as a foundation for the children's decision making as they learned to become critics of their own work—not only to remember and accept past experience, but to think carefully about how it might be applied to future events. Equipped with this information, the children made decisions for which story words to stress and thus communicate their interpretation.

Bart, Stella and Tomás went through their script circling words or underlining them depending on what they wanted to do with the words—raise the voice or lower it and add emotion. Bart devised a system for his lines:

Shelby: Well, /explain to me what your thinking is./
 Bart: /Well, ... the one with the line—/ See, like that. [Pointing to a word he had circled on his script] The ones that are circled I say loud, and the ones that are—like in a straight line, like that [pointing to a word with a line drawn lightly through it], I say quiet.
 Shelby: Oh, okay. Can you show me how it would work? Like do this one.
 Bart: *Oh, I love it!* [read loudly and with enthusiastic expression].
 Shelby: Oh, that's great. Okay, and—[laughs] that's gonna work perfectly. And ... then this one?
 Bart: It says *I really shouldn't eat them. On the other hand, how can I RESIST?* [said in a quiet voice].
 Shelby: Now, why did you decide to do that quietly?
 Bart: Because, why ... would they wanna hear you say are you gonna eat 'em, or not? ... See, they don't want you to hear that they're gonna eat 'em, and they shouldn't hear you talkin' about it, so you gotta say it low.
 Shelby: I get it. That's great. Okay, and then read me this line.
 Bart: *I certainly WOU::LD!* [Circled line read with high, enthusiastic voice]
 Shelby: Oh, that's terrific. And then, what did you do with this one?
 Bart: ... *Frank oo berry mush.* [Circled line read between clenched teeth and with frustration]
 Shelby: [Laughs] Now, you know what? That ... loudness seemed different to me than this loudness. You seemed angrier in that loudness. Why ... would you make that kind of a choice?

Bart: Because ... you're MAD, you can't eat anything ... And you get hungry and hungry, and you can DIE! (15 March 1991)

Circling the words that he wanted to say louder and drawing a line lightly through those he wanted to whisper, Bart devised a system to signal shifts in intonation. Even within louder lines, some words ('WOULD') received additional stress or an elongated vowel. Bart's analysis of the fox's character shows the subtle differences in tone, for some words are stressed to show enthusiasm and others to show anger and frustration. Raising or lowering the volume of a word in a sentence can signal a multiplicity of meanings. For young actors like Bart, the reasoning behind word emphasis provided insights into their character interpretation. Since the fox had a number of inner thoughts that had to be vocalized for the audience but were obviously not for the De Sotos' ears, the stress on these thoughts was not really a quietening of the voice but a stage whisper. Even within the whisper, however, certain words required more stress. '*On the other hand, how can I RESIST?*' Bart whispered, emphasizing the key word that revealed the fox's inability to control his baser instincts.

The line '*Frank oo berry mush*' [Thank you very much] which the fox stated through his glued-together teeth was particularly interesting. In discussion with Bart, Bill had emphasized that the line, though said through clenched teeth, had to be clearly articulated in order to be understood. He explained that it was part of the 'actor's responsibility' to ensure that the audience could hear all lines, and Bart would have to take care that the line was not 'thrown away'. Bart repeatedly practised the line, setting his jaw in a tight grin, and forcefully breathing out the words. His practice paid off, for in an evaluation of a rehearsal, both leaders and peers paid high compliments to the group, but particularly Bart:

Bill: [to Tomás] I REALLY liked ... that first line that you had about 'BESERIOUS.' You really said that with such good interpretation. /That was excellent./
 Natasha: /Really good. /
 Greg: ... Um, I like the part where ... Bart is all like skipping through, 'cause he says '*Thank you very much*' 'cause he wanted to eat ... the mice so he says [clenching his teeth and repeating the line] OOO::GH! so like that '*Frank oo berry mush*'.
 Bill: Ya. That was really good frustration that he was ... putting into his interpretation. (15 March 1991)

The line Bart placed about the phrase '*Thank you very much*' in his script was more than a circle. It was a signal for Bart's characterization of the fox's frustration. The fox had wanted to eat the mice and now that his teeth were glued together, he couldn't. Bart's analysis, both on paper and in performance, was a reflection of the common knowledge base established in the dramatic curriculum: techniques that actors follow, experiences of their director, and his group's interpretation of the fox as a cocky, but frustrated character.

Interpretation was heavily dependent on negotiated character analysis. Individual readings, in other words, had to meet group expectations. Following an early rehearsal, Bart summarized the character of the fox in his journal, writing: 'I look like a cocky fox with bad teeth [teeth]. Next I act like [a] smartass and I love mice' (15 March 1991). Bart subsequently decided that a 'smartass' would have his own distinct mode of discourse. In the next

rehearsal, he added a flippant tone to his character's voice and ended some lines with 'baby' or 'honey', explaining that since the fox was 'sly' he ought to talk this way. His group agreed. His first attempt in practice sent them into high giggles. Afterwards, I interviewed them about Bart's choice as well as other aspects of their character analysis:

- Shelby: Bart, when you were doing your part ... in front of the group. You added ... some words. You added like 'Hey Baby' and things like that.
- Bart: Uhuh.
- Shelby: That was pretty neat. What made you decide to do it? And are you gonna keep it?
- Bart: Mmmm Ya ... I am gonna keep it. I don't know what made me do it. It's just - It's more me.
- Shelby: ... [to Stella] Do you think that it fits the fox?
- Stella: /Ya. 'Cause he's sly/
- Bart: /Ya 'Cause he's like/-... he looks like he's real rich and he's ... like real macho and I just think of him saying that ...
- Stella: And he's like a sly fox trying to get-xxx so he's acting like he's all bad ...
- Shelby: How 'bout you, Tomás? What did you think about it?
- Tomás: [Nodding] Good.
- Shelby: You liked it. Now what do you think the dentist is like? Do you think he's sly and kinda uh-you know cool and stuff like that?
- Bart: /No/
- Tomás: /He's rich./ [Bart and Stella laugh]
- Shelby: Why do you think he's rich?
- Tomás: 'Cause he gets lots of money.
- Shelby: ... Ya, /I bet he does/
- Stella: /Then I wouldn't/ be a dentist anymore. [Laughs] I'd quit and go live in a mansion.
- Shelby: Is he-What do you think about how smart he is?
- Tomás: Mmmm. He's smart.
- Shelby: If you were that- If you were Dr De Soto really, Tomás, would you have let the fox in in the first place?
- Stella: NO!
- Tomás: No.
- Shelby: Why not?
- Tomás: 'Cause he would eat me.
- Shelby: ... [Then] why did Dr De Soto decide to let the fox in? I mean, look at him. He looks mean. He's tough. He's way cool. He's macho as Bart said. Why ... would you let him in?
- Stella: 'Cause you're crazy.
- Tomás: Why would I let him in? I'm a fool. [Laughs]

Later in the transcript but still discussing the same question, Bart analysed why Dr De Soto should let the fox in:

- Bart: ... because I think that you should treat a person that's hurt and he was really hurt and-and they thought right when they got in they would trust him but if he pulled any stunts, they'd have to-they would have to kick him out. But that's when they said '*Be serious*' 'cause they didn't want him to like really eat them and they just let him in because he was really hurt and he really needs the treatment and that wouldn't be fair if they just said 'Just get away. We won't treat you.' (27 March 1991)

In the discussion, Tomás and Bart debated two sides to Dr De Soto's character. All the children could agree on the character of the fox-he was sly, macho, cool. But the character of the mouse dentist was not so easily discerned-either he was a fool or he was duty bound. Only through discussion did the children begin to see that both points of view played a part

in the dentist's character. In Bart's analysis he set up a hypothetical situation contrary to what occurred in the story, examining what would happen if the De Sotos refused to treat the fox. He decided that it 'wouldn't be fair', placing hypothetical words of negation in the mouths of the characters ('Just get away. We won't treat you.'), and demonstrating how this type of language would be an inappropriate contrast to their role as professionals. He did not picture the De Sotos as 'fools', but instead depicted them as careful observers, on the lookout for any of the fox's 'stunts'. He analysed the line '*Be serious*' as a warning to the fox and an indication that they were well aware of the threat behind his shenanigans.

Bart's analysis is also heavily marked with mental state verbs that not only reflect his own thoughts and feelings about the characters ('I just *think* of him that way ...' and *I think* that you should treat a person that's hurt ...'), but portray the motivations and intentions of the characters ('[the De Sotos] *thought* right when they got in they would *trust* him, but if he pulled any stunts, they'd have to—they would have to kick him out'). Bart's explanation of his own as well as the characters' mental state goes beyond the surface features of textual word and illustration to explore the mental processes behind the action.⁶

In the analysis of their enactment, Bart, Stella and Tomás expected the characters on the page to have emotions and motivations that drive them to act as they do. They justified the character's actions based on their analysis of the character's major traits. This analysis allowed the children to *believe* in their character's actions and to add titbits to the script to enhance their interpretation. Though never a part of Steig's original text, Bart's addition of a number of flamboyant endearments to the fox's language aligned with his interpretation.

In their analysis, the children built worlds for their characters which were only hinted at in the text, or were not at all apparent. Tomás, for example, took what he knew of dentists and portrayed the De Sotos as 'rich' though no mention of money was made in the text and the illustrations revealed a rather modest abode. Still, his analysis provided support for considering the doctor a fool. It would be one thing if the dentist needed the money, but since he had ample funds, why take the risk? Indeed, Stella agreed, stating that she would 'quit and go live in a mansion' rather than continue in a potentially dangerous position. Thus, the hypothetical judgement statements made by the children reflected a synthesis of what they believed their characters would do (based on real-world associations) and what they felt they could do as actors. They blended the characteristics of face and voice on the page with their own, justifying their interpretations of the lines through hypothetical scenarios which defined and delineated character motivation and intention.

Language about set and costume design: The children also extended their interpretations to set and costume design. To achieve this vision, however, the items they selected had to fit within budget considerations and time and space capabilities. Bart, Stella and Tomás discussed and debated possibilities among themselves and with others, looking for the best solutions. Their classmate Greg, for example, had a magnificent idea for handling the size difference between the fox and the mouse. In the story the fox is quite a bit

larger than the mouse; the mouse dentist, in fact, crawls into the fox's mouth to fix his tooth. The boys who played the characters, however, were not that different in physical size. Greg's vision of the scene solved the problem, but created yet another:

Greg: Well, there's like ... a BIG, humongous model of a fox's head, and it can, like, have wheels in the bottom ... You can like, push the fox's big head inside, so [Bart] could fit in it and work it ... and [with] a microphone, he goes, 'I got a big, big, big toothache. So, the dentist can WALK inside there, and start, you know, fixing.'

Shelby: ... Greg's idea is a wonderful idea. We have to think about whether that's a possibility. One thing that would happen in that idea is that we would lose Bart totally. He wouldn't get to move around. He would only be inside the head. And that kind of construction would take ... up almost all your money. (8 March 1991)

Greg's idea reflected the kind of creativity possible with unlimited resources. In his description, he envisioned a huge model on wheels large enough to hold Bart and equipped with a microphone from which Bart could boom out the agonies of his toothache. The model would be large enough to accommodate Tomás as dentist, who could enter the fox's mouth to do his work. While Greg spoke, many children nodded in agreement, but when I expressed my doubts, the children quickly concurred. If the entire budget went into the building of one scene, there would be nothing left over for the others. Bart was also dissatisfied with Greg's plan, for he made it clear to his fellow players that he wanted to be seen.

Although some children built sets with poster board and paint, the *Dr De Soto* players ultimately concentrated their money on costumes. Stella, Bart and Tomás worked together, with Stella as scribe, to organize and write down their needs:

We need gold tooth fox suit two mice suit and wigs and also masks cloth I can get wite coat soing [sewing] kit scarf hairthings and I can get makup. (Stella, 8 March 1991)

Their list emerged from an extended classroom discussion of the possibilities for action and the ideas represented a much pared-down version of the original. The things they ultimately requested were within reasonable constraints as they separated out what they needed to purchase and what could be brought from home. Tomás brought his little brother's toy doctor's kit, Stella brought a white coat and Bart brought his mother's red jacket which he transformed into the fox's dashing blazer. Tomás's need for a fake tooth was met by his classmate Tyrone. The tooth that Tomás extracted from Bart in the final performance was in fact real, a dead relic from Tyrone's personal collection, which he had brought for Tomás to use.

Language about audience: A key feature of the language around the drama was the children's assessment of their actions and interpretations. They placed the question 'How are we doing?' at the forefront of their discussion, weighing the consequences of their decisions. They rejected some ideas ('Nah! That won't work.') and accepted others ('Okay. Let's try it.'). The authenticity of audience contributed to their continual assessment, for each of the sessions ended in a performance for their classmates. The performance groups knew that if they had not effectively critiqued their own work, others would. The final performance was particularly demanding, for the audience

members were parents and peers from other classes. The children carefully planned the audience, careful not to invite any of the fifth grade classes, for they felt that the older children would know when they 'messed up' and never let them forget it. Instead, they invited some classes of their own age and almost all of the classes of 'little kids' (Grades K-2). Their planning paid off, for these children were eager to believe, and their response was attentive as well as joyous. Bart's interpretation of the fox was particularly well received:

Bart: I really like the part where I kept on saying 'honey' and stuff like that.

Tomás: (laughs)

Bart: [The audience] kept on laughing and laughing. (5 May 1991)

One class sent thank-you letters for the performance. The *Dr De Soto* players received seven illustrated letters, one of which depicted the audience members themselves commenting on the performance. The tiny audience figures had bubbles emerging from their mouths filled with the words, 'Wow!', 'Neat!', and 'Ha Ha!' The positive response the children received was the result of their hard work and preparation as they constructed character motivation from the lines, sought to portray key themes in their staging and sets, and carefully analysed their own work as well as possible audience reaction.

Discussion

At the end of the sixth classroom theatre session, Stella sat down and wrote the following comment in her journal:

What I lik the most today was the play because we got to say what we thought and how we thought. (1 March 1991)

Stella's statement demonstrates the emphasis on thinking in the dramatic curriculum. Too often, drama is praised for its final product, *the language of the play*—the words delivered through intonational choices, accompanied by gestures and striking sets and scenes. These textual features are fundamental, but the process of making these choices—*the language around the play*—may be even more critical. Children immersed in dramatic text think about the talk of many things. Through thought and language (whether that language be articulated through voice, sign or symbol), they place themselves in three worlds—the actual world of their present decision making and the possible worlds of both the characters in the textual situation and the audience members expecting to enter that text. Children become actors, interpreters and critics taking on the 'mantle of the expert' (Heathcote and Herbert 1985).

Independence, negotiation, reflection, criticism and efficacy are often associated with the word 'expert', but children in schools, particularly those labelled by the system, are granted few opportunities to take on this role. When asked to compare round-robin reading with the reading he had done in classroom theatre, Tomás explained: 'If you're reading a book the teacher only picks you once and you don't read that long—[but in classroom theatre]

you get to read a lot. Without the teacher picking you' (5 May 1992). Tomás's comments reflect the kind of reading he had experienced prior to classroom theatre. He was told what to read, when to read and how much to read, and just how little that turns out to be is well supported by research (Applebee *et al.* 1990).

Most disturbing, however, is what children are *not* asked to do, for rarely are they asked to think. Resnick and Resnick (1992: 38) explain the historical dichotomy of curricular opportunities, with intellectual programmes designed for the élite and basic skills assigned to the mass of our student population:

The educational system we have inherited was not, by and large, designed to prepare people for such adaptive functioning in a technically complex environment. Although there have always been proponents of a more challenging intellectual programme in the schools, we have not previously heard so many calls for thinking and reasoning as goals for all students, not just an élite. Like other industrialized countries in the nineteenth century, America developed two educational systems—one designed for an élite, the other for the mass of our population. The mass system was intended to teach routine skills: simple computation, reading predictable texts, reciting civic or religious codes. Its goals for students did not include the ability to interpret unfamiliar texts, construct convincing arguments, understand complex systems, develop approaches to problems, or negotiate problem resolutions in a group. Those goals were reserved for the élite, originally in separate schools, more recently within our comprehensive schools. Despite the tremendous increase in the number of years people now spend in school, the curriculum most Americans are exposed to focuses mainly on the routinized basics of the old mass school system.

The 'old basics' have little to say to the new requirements of designing a thinking-orientated curriculum for *all* students.⁷

Still, it is much easier to critique the old system than to design a new one (Shepard 1992). Curricula of the future will need to include opportunities for full student participation in the planning and problem-solving aspects of authentic, long-term projects or performances. Children involved in such activities will need to think reflectively and critically on their own work and that of others. They will need to step into the multiple roles required of an expert, with inference and interpretation leading them to decisions which will display their understanding. They will need to work co-operatively together, negotiating decisions and providing justifications for individual points of view when they disagree. The teacher's role in such a curriculum will be that of map maker and guide—not as one who 'leads from behind' (Newman 1986), but rather one who walks side by side, discussing, debating and directing children to think outside of their own worlds and ponder alternative possibilities.

This model of future curriculum may strike the reader as far too theoretical and idealistic, until one considers the even match between the vision and the classroom theatre sessions described in this paper. In the space and time of this one classroom and in the interpretation of three young actors, we see the possibilities for immersion, reflection, negotiation and evaluation that the dramatic curriculum offers. Bart, Stella and Tomás were ordinarily distanced from the curriculum. It happened to them. But through drama they entered into the curriculum and made themselves a part of what happened. Like the characters in the play they performed, they had a

problem which only they could solve. Still, they had help. Gardner (1989: 76) argues that 'Arts curricula need to be presented by teachers or other individuals with a deep knowledge of how to "think" in an artistic medium'. Bill knew how to think as an actor, and he led the children, Natasha and me to shift perspective and think like actors as well.

In classroom theatre the children learned perspectives in context. They were actors trying to sort out the very real problems in text interpretation. They were costume designers selecting items to enhance their performance. And they were imagined audience members standing outside their interpretations and judging the merits within. The children did not learn about diverse perspectives from a distance, but rather participated in myriad roles fitting their choices to their peers. Throughout the negotiated action of trying on diverse perspectives, the children discovered and acknowledged a range of sources: themselves, their peers, the text and beyond. Not only did they *enjoy* the experience, but there was 'educational justification' for their work which 'rests on the dual assumption that students are *ready* for the experience (in the sense of being able to integrate it) and that it *leads* somewhere (in the sense of having developmental continuity) (Jackson 1973: 58).

The dramatic curriculum also provides an insider's view of theory into practice. Yet, classroom theatre, with opportunities for children to think like actors and participate in drama, is but one possibility for a future curriculum. Other innovative programmes (such as reciprocal teaching, reading recovery, or cross-age tutoring) could be substituted and many of the results would be the same. The theory suggests that when children are given opportunities for talk, for extended and challenging work, and the support of adults who are willing to guide more than instruct to test, then the children will prove themselves to be articulate, reflective and capable interpreters both of the world of text as well as of the real world. Ultimately, the positive features of this study are less dependent on the trapping of any particular innovation, than on the theoretical emphasis on young children's abilities to express themselves, to shift perspectives and to negotiate that expression with peers, as well as to respond through multiple symbolic systems.

Every story that the children read in the context of classroom theatre ended 'happily ever after' as is wont in the world of children's literature. Even the most dangerous and threatening situations, such as that of Steig's mice, ended with the characters having survived, and more often having achieved their dreams, for Dr and Mrs De Soto live on to treat more dental patients. In children's literature, the small and seemingly insignificant of the earth who seem doomed somehow master the fates. The real world, however, is not so pleasant, nor is a fox so easily duped. If Bart, Stella and Tomás continue in the 'old skills' curriculum what will be their fate? Will they succeed or simply survive? Will they be granted further opportunities to say what they think and how they think, as Stella points out, or will they be lost in the shuffle of future statistics on high school drop-outs? These children are young, but they have already grown old in a system that sets them apart. It is the challenge of new curriculum endeavours to bring them back into the conversation, and the language both in and around drama is one way to do it.

Notes

1. Excerpts from *Dr De Soto* by William Steig. Copyright©1982 by William Steig. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
2. An RSP teacher is a resource teacher specially trained to 'work with an individual or with small groups of students who have learning or behaviour problems' (Shafritz *et al.* 1988: 398).
3. My transcription system was adapted from the conventions outlined by Heath (1983):

- dash means word broken off . full stop ? rising intonation ! when sentence is exclaimed xxx unintelligible : elongated vowel	[] text which is not direct quotation // overlapped speech , list or clause pause CAPS when word(s) are extremely loud <i>Italics</i> for text read rather than spoken ... editorial ellipses
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4. Erickson (1986: 147–148) defines a key linkage as 'key in that it is of central significance for the major assertions the researcher wants to make [and] linking in that it connects up many items of data as analogous instances of the same phenomenon'. The resources for data can be fieldnotes, transcriptions, artefacts or interview notes, with an idea or assertion stemming from one source connecting to similar or supporting evidence from other sources. By building major assertions on key linkages, the researcher provides evidence through multiple data sources, rather than through rare and, perhaps, idiosyncratic events. The researcher thus casts a broad net over her data sources and looks for matching patterns. For example, a student's planning comment on the need for a specific prop to enhance the believability of a scene can be traced through that student's reflective writing, her comments to scene partners, her suggestions for purchase of needed items, and ultimately the use of that prop within the scene. On the other hand, an early dismissal of her prop suggestion might indicate that the prop did not meet the group's criteria for believability. This rejection might then be matched to others (such as the teacher's rejection based on the expense of the requested item) to discover the common reasons for rejection.
5. Raymond McDermott (Class syllabus 1990) has suggested that 'to be rigorous, the researcher must describe empirically some complex phenomena in our world in a way that is consistent with both their internal organization and their consequences in our shared experiences; this demands an intimate, and hard to define, fit between what is done with the people in gathering the data, the procedures for operating on the data, and the conclusions reached about the people being studied (including, by necessity, conclusions about us as researchers)'.
6. Bruner (1990: 51; see also Bruner 1986) explains that an important feature of a well-formed narrative is its 'dual landscape' which he defines as 'events and actions in a putative "real world" occur concurrently with mental events in the consciousness of the protagonists ... For stories have to do with how protagonists interpret things, what things mean to them. This is built into the circumstance of story – that it involves both a cultural convention and a deviation from it that is explicable in terms of an individual intentional state.'
7. Resnick and Resnick (1992: 38–39) continue to argue that 'While it is not new to include thinking, problem-solving, and reasoning in *some* students' school curriculum, it is new to include it *everyone's* curriculum. It is new to seriously aspire to make thinking and problem-solving regular aspects of the school programme for the entire population, even minorities, even non-English speakers, even children of the poor.' Their argument was recently borne out in the national press; in an article in *The New York Times*, Mansnerus (1992: 14) writes: 'For 70 years it has been public school organizing principle No. 1: Each grade has high-track students, middle-track students and some version of the Sweathogs on [the TV programme] "Welcome Back, Kotter". While some discuss Voltaire in class, others are in metal shop. Some make the algebra-readiness cut, some do not. It's the American way. Now a growing number of educators – most of whom, it is safe to say, never took metal shop – are convinced that it's the wrong way. Their cause is "detracking", the dismantling of the sorting mechanisms that American schools rely upon.' The sorting mechanisms, however, are not as simplistic as journalistic portrayals may make them appear. Page's (1989) interpretative study of the lower-track curriculum at a 'heavenly'

high school demonstrates the *construction* of curriculum differentiation which centres on a complex weave of knowledge, expectations, power, ambivalence and negotiation between teachers and their students.

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