Keeping the Kids in School:  
What the drama class tells us

Mantener a los Chicos en la Escuela:  
Lo que nos dice la clase de drama

Garder les enfants à l’école:  
Ce que nous dit la classe d’art dramatique

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ABSTRACT  
Through questionnaires and interviews, this study discovered senior secondary students’ perceptions of their drama class experiences in three different schools from an Ontario public board of education. Questionnaire results from entire classes supported interview results from four students in each class. No notable differences in student perceptions emerged between boys and girls among the three schools. Findings uncovered student attitudes about school motivation, retention, and success that might be applicable across subject areas. Students enjoyed opportunities for physical mobility, peer interaction, and self-expression. They praised authentic, challenging, and relevant learning tasks that culminated in displays for audiences beyond their classrooms. More than subject content, students valued drama class as a source of enduring personal and social growth.  

Key words: secondary school students; student attitudes; student success; drama classrooms; drama pedagogy.

RESUMEN  
Mediante cuestionarios y entrevistas, este estudio reveló las percepciones de estudiantes de último año de educación secundaria acerca de sus experiencias en las clases de drama en tres escuelas del departamento de educación pública de Ontario. Los resultados de los cuestionarios de cada alumno respaldaron los resultados de las entrevistas realizadas sólo a cuatro alumnos de cada curso. No hubo diferencias notables en las percepciones expresadas entre los alumnos y las alumnas de las tres escuelas. Los hallazgos evidenciaron las actitudes de los estudiantes acerca de la motivación escolar, la retención y el éxito, que se podrían aplicar a las distintas materias.
In Ontario secondary schools, drama is an optional subject that some students select in Grade 9 only (Year I: ages 13–14), some select throughout high school, and some never select at all. In over a decade as a secondary teacher, I observed that some teenagers maintained interest in school largely because of drama class, although most had no intention of pursuing the subject as a career. Student retention and success are topics of current interest in Ontario (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rummens, 2005; Leithwood, Fullan, & Watson, 2003; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). However, as Cole and Knowles (2000, 95) assert, “…seldom have students themselves been asked about how they experience the educational process, schools, classrooms, and teachers.” This study, focused on student perceptions, identifies factors associated with Grade 12 students’ (Year IV: ages 17–18) interest, retention, and success in senior level drama classrooms across one Ontario school board.

Situating the Study: The Ontario Context and Participating Schools

The Ontario Context

The Ontario Ministry of Education specifies course requirements and curriculum guidelines for all school programs in the province. All secondary students must complete a course in one of drama, music, visual arts, or comprehensive arts (Ontario
Ministry of Education, 1999). All secondary schools must therefore offer at least one Year I arts course; however, not all schools offer Year I drama. After Year 1, the arts become an elective subject within a compulsory curriculum of English, math, science, and social science. Schools that offer Year I drama may or may not continue the subject to Year IV.

Ontario stratifies secondary course offerings into three levels: the academic level prepares for post-secondary education, the applied level leads to employment, and the open level is available to all students. All Year I arts courses are offered at the open level. Depending on the school, Year IV courses are offered at any of the three levels. Schools involved in this study offered Year IV drama at either the academic or open level. The distinguishing feature among academic, open, and applied level senior drama courses is the degree of focus on research, theory, and theatre history; all three emphasize theatrical production. While stipulating broad strands of study (i.e., theory, creation, and analysis), the provincial drama curriculum in effect at the time of this research (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000) allowed teachers to devise courses to suit the abilities and interests of themselves and their students. Thus, although senior drama courses fulfill similar objectives, specific content differs from school to school.

The Participating Schools

This study occurred in a southern Ontario, publically-funded school board where most students descend from Caucasian backgrounds and live in small- to medium-sized towns or rural communities. After obtaining both school board and university ethics approval to conduct the study, I sought a purposive site sample (McMillan, 2000, 110) by asking a board administrator to identify secondary schools that (a) offer Year IV drama, (b) have experienced drama teachers of positive reputation, and (c) reflect, as a group, student demographics across the region. I then contacted by mail and telephone the identified schools’ principals and drama teachers. Three of four identified schools agreed to participate. The fourth did not respond to my invitation.

- **School A** includes students from rural or semi-rural households, with many families involved in farming. School A’s Year IV drama course is offered at the open level. During this study, the school produced an extra-curricular musical and also performed an original script in a regional one-act play festival.

- **School B** serves a few small towns and villages, housing several professional families. School B’s Year IV double-credit TYA (theatre for young audiences) course is offered at the academic level. During this study the Year IV class production was a finalist in the regional one-act play festival.

- **School C** includes students from a manufacturing town that has experienced shutdowns and layoffs. Its Year IV drama course is offered at the open level. During this study, the class rehearsed and performed a professionally written script for the local community.

No school involved in this study houses an auditorium; in all three, drama is taught
in classrooms not originally designed for the subject. The rooms, while clean and ade-
quate, share a somewhat makeshift appearance, with a prevalence of school-built, 
refurbished, or donated supplies and furniture. All contain rudimentary set pieces, 
lighting, and sound equipment. School A's drama room consists of a large concrete and 
tile basement area that had been vacant for several years before drama was added to the 
curriculum. School B's drama room is a former machine shop, located in the technical 

Year IV drama in these schools focuses heavily on the production of one or more 
scripts, either collaboratively created in class or professionally written, with perfor-
mances staged for community and/or school audiences. During this study, School A's 
students used newspaper stories as source material for collaboratively devising one-act 
scripts, in a Brechtian style, that they performed for a single public evening audi-
ence. School B's unique double-credit (full morning) TYA course involved students 
in creating and performing a one-act, issue-based play for multiple daytime audi-
ences of elementary school children, rotating cast and crew on a three-day schedule. 
School C's students searched for professionally written plays requiring the number 
and gender of students in the class, and then democratically chose one to produce. A 
comic twist on the murder mystery genre, their full-length production was directed 
by a student and performed twice: once for the entire school and again for an evening 
public audience.

**Conceptualizing the Study:**

**Aims, Design, and Instrumentation**

The turn of the twenty-first century produced a number of teacher-as-researcher ac-
counts of secondary school drama/theatre pedagogy (e.g., Gallagher, 2000; Conrad, 
Judge, 2002; McLauchlan, 2000; Owens, 2000; Young, 2000). Few researchers, 
however, have investigated secondary drama education from a non-participant per-
spective (e.g., McDonald, 2000; Nicholson, 2003; Sallis, 2003, 2004), and almost 
none have compared findings across settings while focusing on student perceptions 
(McCammon, 2010). As a non-participant researcher, I conducted this study with 
three aims in mind: (a) to document student attitudes about motivation, retention, 
and success in senior drama courses; (b) to reveal student beliefs about the value of 
drama education; and (c) to compare findings across schools and genders.

“Morally responsible research behavior is more than abstract ethical knowledge 
and cognitive choices; it involves the moral integrity of the researcher, his or her 
sensitivity and commitment to moral issues and actions” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, 
74). Ethical research practice entails an acknowledgement of researcher assumptions 
and biases. I approached this study not as a neutral investigator, but as a former 
secondary school drama teacher whose engrained beliefs are rooted in over a decade
of classroom practice. Through the lens of my own experience, I anticipated that senior drama students would highly value the subject for a number of reasons, including its emphasis on classroom action and interaction. I predicted that being in a drama class would increase students’ enjoyment of school, and would, in some cases, motivate students to attend and remain in school. I wondered whether school differences would emerge in the findings: would unique classroom practices and cultures produce students who valued setting-specific aspects of drama? I wondered whether stereotypical gender differences would appear, with boys stressing drama’s physical activity and girls stressing its peer interactivity.

Because I entered the investigation with strong biases, I rigorously attempted to minimize the effect of my beliefs on the responses of student participants, whose true opinions I sought. One means of accomplishing this task was to solicit information, in various forms, through neutrally-worded questions. The investigation adopted a mixed-method design, combining quantitative and qualitative questionnaire findings with semi-structured interviews. The intent was for all students in three senior drama classes to complete a 20 to 30-minute questionnaire, followed at a later date by audio-taped interviews with two girls and two boys from each class.

Avoiding biased language and leading questions (Neuman, 2007, 170-171), I devised the questionnaire in three sections: Section 1 obtained demographic information that identified students according to school, gender, and age, and provided additional facts that might potentially be relevant for later group comparison (e.g., whether or not students held part-time jobs). Section 2 contained 12 brief closed statements to which student either agreed or disagreed (e.g., “I was encouraged by my friends to take drama;” “I generally enjoy school.”) This section obtained information that could readily be quantified and compared for school and/or gender differences. Section 3 asked students to write short answers to 12 open-ended questions (e.g., “Before entering high school, what experiences of drama did you have?” “What do you like best/least about drama class?”) This section purposely permitted an unlimited range of response and allowed for unanticipated information.

While questionnaires help determine the magnitude or prevalence of participant attitudes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, 114-115), interviews offer a greater understanding of individual opinions. In order to generate trustworthy information, as uninfluenced as possible by my preconceptions, I focused the semi-structured interviews on descriptive accounts of particular situations and actions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, 28-30). I devised the interview guide as a series of neutrally-posed questions that aimed (a) to trace a brief history of students’ school-based participation in drama, (b) to determine what happens in typical senior drama classrooms, (c) to identify factors motivating students to continue studying drama throughout high school, and (d) to elicit student opinions on the value of drama education.

**Conducting the Study: Information Gathering**

Administered during the final weeks of term, the questionnaires and interviews necessitated three visits to each school. On Visit 1, I introduced myself, explained the
nature of the research, observed the class, and distributed parental and student consent letters. (Only two students, one housed in a foster home, failed to return signed parental consent forms.) A major aim of Visit 1 was to establish a degree of comfort and “friendly feelings” (Neuman, 2007, 284) between myself and the students, thus engaging their willingness to participate in the study. I explained that I am a former secondary school drama teacher, now a university professor, with a continued interest in teenagers’ views about drama. I stressed that I would be focusing primarily on their positive recollections, and not probing for weaknesses of their drama programs, teachers, or schools. I emphasized the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation in the research.

On Visit 2, all students present in class completed the questionnaire. Common secondary school occurrences caused various student absences (e.g., a fieldtrip in one school, a sports tournament in another.) Next, students willing to participate in an audio-taped interview placed their names in a hat, from which two girls’ and two boys’ names were drawn. (School C’s class included only two boys, one of whom was willing to be interviewed; I thus interviewed three girls instead of two at that site.)

On Visit 3, I conducted the interviews, each lasting between 15 and 25 minutes. Interviews occurred during class time in various secluded areas close to the drama room. In all cases, students’ answers to prepared questions prompted much unscripted follow-up inquiry. In total, I interviewed seven girls (two from each of School A and B, three from School C) and five boys (two from each of School A and B, one from School C.) As a form of member check, I sent the appropriate interview transcript to each student via email, soliciting changes to the document. All responded that their opinions had been accurately recorded and transcribed.

Analyzing Results: The Questionnaires

Questionnaire analysis consisted of the following procedures. First, all responses were copied verbatim onto the computer and collated in separate files according to school and gender (i.e., School A Boys, School A Girls, etc.). Next, results for Questionnaire Section A were quantitatively tallied in frequency charts according to school and gender (e.g., number of students who self-identified as audio, visual, or kinesthetic learners; number of students holding part-time jobs, etc.). Section B’s yes or no responses (e.g., “I am involved in drama activities outside of class,” etc.) were similarly tallied in frequency charts.

Section C’s open-ended qualitative responses required coding and categorizing before they could be quantified in frequency charts. Because most responses took the form of concise sentences or phrases, I relied on descriptive and In Vivo coding. “Descriptive coding summarizes in a word or short phrase…the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (Saldaña, 2009, 70). In Vivo codes adopt participants’ exact words, denoted by quotation marks.

Codes of similar meaning generated clustered categories of response. For example, when asked what students like most about drama class, responses such as “the people,”
“friends,” and “making people smile” were all categorized as under the cluster of social interaction. Sometimes, In Vivo categories best captured students’ attitudes and perceptions. For example, the In Vivo code “different way of teaching and learning” became a category that encapsulated multiple responses describing facets of drama’s active, interactive, and expressive nature.

After Section C results were categorized and tallied, all questionnaire results were compared across schools and genders according to response frequencies. When no notable differences emerged, either among schools or between boys and girls, all results were combined into total score frequency charts.

**Questionnaire Findings**

Questionnaire results from 19 Year IV girls and 14 boys, all of Caucasian descent, were generated in this investigation. Almost all were 17 or 18 years old, with the large majority enrolled in academic and/or open level subjects. Almost half self-identified as kinesthetic learners. Approximately ¾ claimed to enjoy school, with 100% reporting that drama increases school enjoyment, and 82% (84% girls and 79% boys) reporting that drama motivates them to attend school. Eighty-five percent identified drama as their favorite subject (90% girls and 80% boys). Physical education was boys’ second favorite (43%); otherwise, boys identified very few subjects as enjoyable. Girls’ enjoyable subjects included English, visual art, music, and physical education. Math was the least favorite subject for both boys (71%) and girls (90%), followed by science and English.

Almost 2/3 of students held part-time jobs. All except one were involved in one or more extra-curricular activities: 67% in arts-related activities (mostly school drama productions), 58% in sports, and 45% in various school/church clubs. Students identified a wide range of post-secondary goals; almost ⅔ of girls aspired to various arts-related careers (e.g., singer, fashion designer, actress). Almost all Year IV students (93%) claimed to have studied drama throughout high school because they “like it.” Approximately half (52%) had been encouraged by friends to study drama, 53% by their drama teacher, and 33% by a guidance counselor. None had been encouraged by a school administrator. Almost 25% studied drama in order to improve self-expression, participate in collaborative creative projects, take risks, and/or push personal boundaries. Students recalled meagre elementary school drama experiences, mostly involving extra-curricular performances; only one remembered attending a regular drama class before secondary school.

Few students met surprises in their Year IV drama coursework, although some had not anticipated the strong cohesiveness that developed amongst classmates. A large majority (91%) experienced a “fantastic feeling” of peer affiliation in their drama class. Creative and physical freedom within an accepting sense of “family” encouraged students to “face challenges” and enhance self-expression. A few reported single frequency negative opinions about drama (e.g., “I really don’t like warm-up stretches”; a few disliked writing reflective journals and three (one from each school) complained about “bossy” classmates.
As Table 1 displays, Year IV students clearly viewed drama as different from other courses. Almost 2/3 described drama pedagogy in or way or another as a “different way of teaching and learning;” more active, interactive, and expressive than other classes, involving more freedom of movement and speech. Some (26.5%) mentioned a more informal and non-restrictive classroom atmosphere, where students make important decisions, opinions are not deemed “wrong answers,” and teachers work and learn alongside the class. Some (18.5%) claimed that drama offers more “fun” and motivation to learn than other classes. Only a few mentioned course content or difficulty as a difference between drama and other subjects.

Table 1. Year IV Student Perceptions of Drama’s Differences from Other Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Different way of teaching &amp; learning”</th>
<th>Classroom atmosphere</th>
<th>Fun &amp; Course motivation to learn</th>
<th>Written content</th>
<th>Work &amp; texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (Boys &amp; Girls)</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2 displays, Year IV students viewed drama class as a major catalyst for personal and social growth. Improved self-confidence was the most frequently identified benefit, followed by creativity and self-expression. Drama helped some students overcome fears of taking risks, speaking in public, and trying new experiences. Others perceived drama as an opportunity to relieve stress and enjoy learning. Only 11.5% identified increased theatrical ability/performance skill as a benefit of drama class, and fewer than 10% considered drama as a post-secondary education or career goal. Some boys (14%) mentioned drama’s capacity to generate “a sense of hard work and success.”

Table 2. Year IV Perceptions of the benefits of Studying Drama

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Personal Growth</th>
<th>Social Growth</th>
<th>Increased theatre performance skills</th>
<th>Post-Secondary education/ career</th>
<th>“Sense of hard work &amp; success”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (Boys &amp; Girls)</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Navigating the UNESCO Road Map for Arts Education: Current directions in research and best practice

Analyzing Results: The Interviews

“Drama’s a lot of fun but it’s also really hard too.” — (Year IV boy)

“It’s just, I think, the most important class in the school.” — (Year IV girl)

Structural coding (Saldaña, 2009, 67), a technique that uses interview question topics as a priori categories, was the preliminary procedure I employed in analyzing the 12 interview transcripts. Coding took a question-by-question approach, attending particularly to students’ expressed recollections, attitudes, and emotions. (For example, responses to the question “Can you tell me about a vivid memory of drama class this term?” were categorized under the category “vivid memories of drama class.”)

Coding relied heavily on the In Vivo method as a way “to honor [students’] voices and to ground the analysis from their perspective” (Saldaña, 2009, 48). As I read and reread the transcripts, I frequently wrote analytic memos to document and reflect on analysis procedures and choices (32). When I was eventually satisfied with the precise code labels I had selected, I began to collapse codes and categories generated across questions. At this point, I reviewed the findings for notable differences either among schools or between boys and girls. Finding none, I condensed the entire set of interview results into six major themes. The following discussion of these themes contains the most salient of In Vivo codes and interview quotations (with most instances of word repetition, “um”, and colloquialisms such as “like” and “you know” extracted).

Theme 1: Year IV students studied drama throughout high school for four major reasons.

Four primary factors motivated students to study drama throughout high school. In order of response frequency, these include: (a) the opportunity to collaborate with peers of similar interests: “…it’s nice to be able to work with people I’ve known for years and we’ve been doing this together for years” (Year IV girl); “You’ve gone through certain trials with these people so you’re really trusting towards them and they’re really trusting towards you” (Year IV girl); (b) the teacher: “I have a great teacher who taught me a lot and who believed in me” (Year IV boy); (c) the thrill of performing for an audience: “Being on stage and performing in front of people, like, that’s like a huge rush and it’s just a great feeling when you do good” (Year IV boy); and (d) the unique atmosphere of a drama classroom: “I can be myself and at the same time be someone else” (Year IV girl); “It’s a place for me to express myself in a fun way” (Year IV girl).

Theme 2: Students valued drama’s differences from other high school courses.

One clearly expressed distinction of the drama class is its kinesthetic nature. Two girls, from different schools, offered the identical comment: “[In drama,] I don’t have
to sit in a desk for an hour and a half.” Students compared the physical engagement of drama class with the more inactive pupil role in other coursework. “[Drama’s] not like your other classes where you just sit down and take notes all day” (Year IV girl). “[In drama], you’re not sitting at a desk and just writing things, or plugging numbers into a calculator. You’re moving around” (Year IV boy).

A second source of drama’s uniqueness is its emphasis on community building and psychological safety. Students repeatedly identified classmates a “family” or emotional oasis. “The students become, not a trust bond, but a family” (Year IV boy). “We’re all so supportive of one another and we’re like a big family [working] together” (Year IV girl). “If I’m having a bad day, I go to drama and it’s instantly better because my family, my little drama family, takes care of it” (Year IV girl). “You know, like, you’re safe there” (Year IV girl).

Students viewed drama, unlike other courses, as a place where their opinions and efforts are encouraged, supported, and accepted. “I’ve learned that I have a lot of ideas in my head…but most times, in other classes, I wouldn’t say my idea” (Year IV boy). “If [drama classmates] were uncomfortable about the way a scene was going, people would understand, and people would comfort you if [your work] was bad” (Year IV boy). “When you’re bouncing [ideas] off other people and taking their ideas, and then throwing them back at them, you never say no…you always accept, so drama’s about accepting” (Year IV girl).

Drama’s fourth distinction is the perceived usefulness of learning tasks: Many people feel that when they go through high school, the stuff they learn they might never use in life. For example, some of your math, or some of your English, you might never use ever in your life. However, the stuff you learn in drama, you’ll use for the rest of your life. (Year IV boy)

**Theme 3: The teacher was a cornerstone of students’ positive experiences in drama.**

All students viewed their drama teachers as creators of positive classroom environments. Interview comments clustered into nine characteristics of exemplary pedagogy:

(i) Good drama teachers are passionate about their jobs. Students frequently alluded to the contagion of their teachers’ zeal, “energy,” and “enthusiasm.”

(ii) Good drama teachers relate well to teenagers. “The teacher knows you and what you can do” (Year IV boy). Teachers demonstrate their knowledge of students by providing enjoyable, appropriate, and engaging learning tasks.

(iii) Good drama teachers actively impart foundational knowledge to students. At the same time, they allow students to forge unique learning paths. “[The teacher] won’t tell you exactly what to do…You hafta find your own character within yourself” (Year IV boy).

(iv) Good drama teachers build structure and routine into the teaching and learning environment. Students readily identified classroom procedures that anchored
their work in “typical day” predictability. Rituals such as “energy circle” and “focus exercises” encouraged collaborative creativity and signaled students to “get straight down to work” (Year IV girl).

(v) Good drama teachers ensure that students are supportively challenged and on task. Students valued teachers who maintain orderly, task-focused classrooms while fostering creative risk-taking in an atmosphere of acceptance. “If you’re scared, that’s fine, the teacher will encourage you” (Year IV boy).

(vi) Good drama teachers trust their students, thus making them more responsible for their actions. “We had a lot of freedom, and it felt like we chose to work together, and if we came across any problems we discussed as a team what to do” (Year IV boy). “For our major production, we had a student director and the teacher let him make really important decisions” (Year IV boy).

(vii) Good drama teachers listen to, accept, and respect student opinions. “[Our teacher] always brings his thoughts, but he isn’t aggressive about it. If we have an idea, he tries to add it on” (Year IV girl). Through both example and instruction, teachers serve as role models and coaches of productive and enjoyable collaboration.

I want to be a teacher, and I want to be able to teach in fun ways, and I’m going to be able to remember back to [my teacher] and think, “I learned how to teach kids this way” and it’s just going to be a great experience to have for the rest of my life. (Year IV boy)

(viii) Good drama teachers are co-participants and learners in classroom events. “My teacher doesn’t give the impression that she already knows the answers. She finds them with us” (Year IV girl). In preparation for public performance, teachers work alongside students on various production elements. “The teacher wrote scenes with us” (Year IV boy). “Our teacher helped paint sets and typed up the program” (Year IV girl).

(ix) Good drama teachers assess student progress on an ongoing basis, focusing on components beyond rote learning, tests, and performance ability. They avoid comparing students against standards of innate theatrical talent; rather, they weave individualized assessment into every facet of the learning process. “To get good marks in drama, it’s not about brains or how well you can write stuff on paper. It’s how much you’re willing to test your limits and go above and beyond” (Year IV boy). “It’s not about if you get a wrong answer…then you get a bad mark…It’s more abstract…as long as you express yourself in a what that is important to you, then, if you have a good teacher, you get a mark for it” (Year IV boy).

Theme 4: Drama class enhanced student learning in five distinct categories.

(i) Drama teaches subject-specific skills, techniques, and concepts. Year IV students expanded skills of improvising, scriptwriting, play-building, and performing.
They also grew in aesthetic awareness: “[Drama] is a very, almost beautiful thing. I mean, it really gets you, and you have to have, like, a soul and spirit to get it” (Year IV boy). “I can actually sit down for half an hour just watching people perform and having those feelings when they’re talking go through your body and just let myself experience the feelings” (Year IV boy).

Students learned about the complexity of theatrical production by rehearsing and performing scripts for audiences beyond their classmates and teachers. “I came into [this class] thinking it would be all about acting and learning how to improve acting and I’ve learned that [production is] so much more than that” (Year IV girl). “The art [of theatre] is just hard because you hafta make it look good and look like it’s not planned out, and that it’s coming naturally” (Year IV girl). “There’s so much more involved…than just going up [on stage] and saying lines” (Year IV boy). “There’s just so much more to drama that people don’t know about” (Year IV boy).

Students described rehearsal and performance as lessons in “focus and responsibility” (Year IV girl). “I’ve learned about rehearsing and performing and not being so nervous….Memorizing is one of my problems and this year I’ve overcome that very, very well” (Year IV boy). “I know it might look very easy to get up there and say your lines and everything, but when you’re actually up there, so many things can go wrong” (Year IV boy).

Students learned about characterization. “I learned how to become a character. I had to make up everything about her, her attitude, her character completely” (Year IV girl). “I’ve learned by playing my character more about movement and how other characters react when I’m on stage” (Year IV girl). “I learned a lot about …never breaking character, even when I don’t have lines, reacting to situations as though I were my character” (Year IV girl).

Some students mentioned the instructional value of constructive criticism. “Many kids have to learn what my teacher calls Humble Pie where you have to take some criticism. Drama involves a lot of criticism” (Year IV boy). “Instead of looking at something as bad, we talk about the good things and then we think about the negatives, but always in a way that we can fix them up” (Year IV boy).

Students consistently viewed their audiences as sources of learning and motivation. “Right after a performance, we always talk about what we did wrong, what we did good, what kind of reaction we got from the crowd” (Year IV boy). “You have so much confidence after seeing how many people you’ve, like, impressed, and it’s just a huge confidence booster with everything I do” (Year IV boy).

We were all getting tired and we were getting sick of rehearsing….But as soon as we performed, it was like we saw on [the audience’s] faces how much they enjoyed it, how much they interacted with us, how much all of our hard work was benefiting other kids, and it motivated us to practice more and do better. (Year IV girl)

“[Performing] taught me the connection between the actor and the
audience…It’s never expressed through verbal conversation that the audience goes away feeling something, some sort of inspiration….When you’re reading the audience, and you can connect to them, it’s kind of like the magic of theatre. (Year IV girl)

(ii) Drama class teaches transferable social and collaborative skills.
All students highlighted drama’s value in developing interpersonal skills, with many claiming that drama’s most significant learning relates to teamwork. “I think teamwork and cooperation were the most important [aspects of learning] this year” (Year IV boy). “There’s no way you could put a performance together like we did without knowing how to work in groups…Everybody has to look at things for the greater good of the show” (Year IV boy).

You just really need to learn how to work together and listen to your director, and listen to ideas from other cast members, and learn how to play off other cast members when you’re on stage, and learn how you can best support each other. And I think that’s a really good skill to learn, and you’re just set to be using it in other places. (Year IV boy)

Some students described the process of consensus building. “You have to listen to every single person, compromise ideas…and you basically have to back up everything you say” (Year IV boy). “Everyone might not agree on what is being said, everyone’s not going to agree completely, but it was really important that we all kinda just gave up something a little bit” (Year IV girl). “If people came into drama personally…attached to their own ideas, they would learn to let it go because in a collaborative process you hafta be open to other people’s ideas” (Year IV girl).

Enhanced understanding of group dynamics taught students about leadership. “You have to learn a lot about leadership when you’re in groups and cooperating with others” (Year IV girl). “I’ve learned a lot about leadership. I’m not really good at speaking up sometimes, so I’ve learned to really speak up to my group members when they’re not focusing or doing what they’re supposed to do” (Year IV girl). “I guess drama taught me that I’m perfectly capable of working with others very well, and that I’m also able to be a leader” (Year IV boy).

Students of various cliques learned to work together productively. “You have the jocks, and then you’ll have your smart group, and then you have the group that always loves music, you know, and you’ve got to be able to fit and always get along” (Year IV boy).

(iii) Drama class teaches students to empathize with characters they portray or observe.

Scenes developed through improvisation were frequently based on students’ lived experiences. “You’ll think about anything you’ve ever done in your life and what kind of conflict there is, like brother/sister conflict, mother/daughter conflict” (Year IV boy). Exploring real life issues in a fictional context
encouraged students to analyze and reflect on behavior from a range of perspectives. “You learn about people's emotions and experiences.” “You'll listen to the rest of the class and see how they're dealing with the problems in drama, and then this might give you some [real life] ideas” (Year IV boy).

School A students created one-act plays from newspaper stories. One girl described her group's creation of a script about AIDS in which she grew to understand the perspectives of both sex trade workers and university researchers. School C students rehearsed and performed a professional script. One girl explained that, although the world of the play differed from her own, she identified with her character by finding similarities that transcended culture and age.

(iv) Drama class promotes personal growth and enhances general life skills.

All students who self-identified as shy claimed that drama helped them become more outgoing. “I was always really, really shy when I was younger. And drama kind of made me be louder, I guess, boosted my confidence a lot” (Year IV girl). “I used to be pretty shy, actually, before I came into drama. I wouldn't like to really talk to people I didn't know, but after drama it's just a completely different feeling” (Year IV boy).

Four of the five boys interviewed self-identified as shy in elementary school; all praised drama class for enhancing their self-esteem and encouraging them to interact with peers. Part of their confidence grew through performing for public audiences. “I'm not usually one to go on stage, but I found [in drama] I was actually learning to open myself and not worry what other people are thinking, and be myself and just do what I do” (Year IV boy).

Drama has basically given me every ounce of confidence I have. I used to think, like, I had no confidence in public speaking, but now getting up there and talking in front of people doesn't bother me at all 'cause I know that people are not out there looking for you to make mistakes. People are out there listening to you because they want to listen to you. (Year IV boy)

Students improved both expressive and receptive communication skills. “Communication skills would be one of the [most important] things in the drama room. You hafta be able to say who you are and, you know, just listen to everyone else” (Year IV boy). “I like to internalize a lot of things that I'm feeling, so through expressing myself on stage…it's just really helped me communicate better” (Year IV girl).

Drama encouraged students to be more creative. One problem that I've always had is that I cannot think outside the box. In drama, I learned to read between the lines. I learned how to expand upon my horizons. The big thing I learned in drama was to think outside the box. (Year IV boy)
For boys especially, drama class helped clarify their personal strengths and appreciate who they are. “I learned quite a bit about myself in drama, probably more that I learned about myself in any other class” (Year IV boy). “[Drama class] just builds you up as a person, inside” (Year I boy).

[Drama has] definitely shown me that I can write, I can read a play, I can analyze a play, I can act, I can get up there and communicate, I can make people laugh, or make people feel sad or angry.” (Year IV boy)

(v) Drama class helps students succeed in other classes, and prepares them for employment and post-secondary education. “I feel that drama has helped me for the rest of high school” (Year IV boy). “You can take what you learn in drama outside of school to college or university or wherever” (Year IV boy). “All the experience I’ve had [in drama class] helps me in an interview when talking to people I hardly know” (Year IV boy). “[Drama] helps me know how to take initiative in a workplace” (Year IV boy). “If I go to college, I know I’ll be able to talk to people more” (Year IV girl).

**Theme 5: Drama class engaged students emotionally.**

Although the word “fun” interspersed all interview transcripts, students found the demands of drama class emotionally challenging, and many vivid memories involved conquering various obstacles or fears. One commonly overcome fear was performing for an audience, an experience students described as an affectively charged event generating both positive and negative emotions. Some recalled their Year I monologue, performed for an audience of classmates.

Writing my [Year I] monologue, I guess, was a challenge for me….I spent a lot of time on it, and then when I performed it in front of the class, I felt really good about myself, because I think I did a really good job and I got a really good mark. (Year IV girl)

I remember I was very, very nervous to go on stage and perform a monologue all by myself….Part of me did not want to do it, like I really did not want to get up there and do anything, but then there was a small, very small part of me that said, I hafta try this, so I went up there, did it, and it was one of the greatest feelings when people were clapping and saying it was a really good monologue. (Year IV boy)

Emotional attachment to their work deepened as students progressed throughout high school. Two recalled projects they undertook in Year III.

During the rehearsals, I felt so frustrated with the actors because I was the director and that was a very new thing for me and I just thought
I was going to go crazy, but then in the end, when we did the performance, I felt so proud of everyone and everyone was so happy, and I never felt better. (Year IV girl)

In [Year III], I did a final play with three other guys. We did a rendition of *Waiting for Godot* and just blew it out of the water….We did about 20 minutes of the play and extended it with our own actions. We were, like, wow, this play is amazing. (Year IV boy)

In Year IV, students rehearsed work that they then performed for public audiences. School A students created issue-based one-act plays performed in a Brechtian style. “…our group worked so hard and so well together and we were so on the ball with it and wanted to do it right so we could show it to the class” (Year IV girl). For School B students, who created an original play for children, the first performance was exceptionally stressful because they had not had time for a complete dress rehearsal.

The very first day we performed, we were all really nervous, but we were all there for each other, so we automatically got that feeling of, like, we’re going to go on, we’re going to do this, together we’re going to pull through, and everyone’s going to do a really good job, no matter what, and it was a really important day for us because the audience loved us, so we were really proud of ourselves. (Year IV girl)

School C students expressed great pride in their community and school performance of a professionally written script. “We got so many good comments from it. We worked on it so hard, for so long, and it was such a great feeling to finally perform it and have it go so well” (Year IV boy).

I just can’t get off the topic of this play. It’s just the biggest thing….We worked so hard as a group and we all came together and I just cannot believe how well we worked together. It’s the biggest moment in our whole time I’ve been in drama. It was just amazing. (Year IV girl)

**Theme 6: Students valued drama class very highly, although its perceived benefits were largely unrelated to curriculum content.**

All interviewed students perceived drama class as an important aspect of their secondary school experience. None, however, focused on subject-specific learning, and only one, the daughter of a professional actress, viewed drama as a potential area of post-secondary study. Students overwhelmingly highlighted the personal and interpersonal value of drama class, with categories spanning release from the seriousness or dullness of highly academic subjects to the sole motivation to attend school.

Asked to identify the major benefits of their drama programs, students most fre-
quently described the building of social networks and interpersonal skills (encapsulating collaborative skills). “It’s the people skills you learn” (Year IV boy). “It helps you make new friends, which is a big part of high school” (Year IV girl).

The drama room is where you go to talk, where you can control your fears, where you can get along with everyone, and if you’re lost and you don’t have friends, the drama room will make you friends. (Year IV boy)

Students viewed classmates as wellsprings of cross-cultural affiliation and identity formation. “We’re the drama people…and when you choose to define yourself as that, it’s a really cool feeling, and you know who you are” (Year IV girl). “You could have so many different people from different cultures, all brought up differently and they’ll all mingle and learn to get along with each other inside and outside the [drama] classroom” (Year IV girl).

Personal growth and heightened self-knowledge was the second most prevalent response category. “I’ve taken drama for the basic reason of learning more about myself and learning more about others” (Year IV boy). Students frequently mentioned the benefit of overcoming shyness and/or social awkwardness. “If you’re a really shy person, I would encourage you to take drama because you’ll come out of the class naturally just feeling more open to sharing your ideas and…finding ways to connect with other people” (Year IV girl). “…it’s like joining a team except you don’t have to be brave enough to go and try out for it, you just come to class and you make friends” (Year IV girl).

Students valued the drama class as an emotional haven for teenagers. “I think kids are getting kinda more out there in their lives and stuff, and drama is a good escape from their lives” (Year IV boy). “I believe [the drama class] is one of the major ways to get stress off your mind” (Year IV boy). For some, the class served as a refuge from personal problems. “Through high school, I’ve gone through a lot of family problems, so that drew me to drama more because it was a way to express myself when I couldn’t at home…[drama] helped me believe in myself more” (Year IV girl).

Students also attached value to developing their creative and expressive potential in drama class. “Being in drama class is very important to me because it gives me a chance to express myself…and I can focus all the energy I have into the creative process” (Year IV girl). Some suggested that the confidence developed in drama class transfers to other subject areas. “I know many people who haven’t taken drama and they’re really nervous when they [do presentations in other courses]” (Year IV girl). “I think it’s really good for kids’ self-esteem [in other classes] and it makes them feel comfortable” (Year IV girl).

Finally, students recognized that drama class motivates some teenagers to attend and remain in school. “I think it makes school life so much more enjoyable” (Year IV boy). “It’s a way to keep school fun and it actually, for some people, it helps them want to come to school because they have that class to take” (Year IV girl).
Summary

Through a mixed-method research approach, this study gathered information about senior secondary students’ perceptions of their drama class experiences. Participants included teenagers (aged 17–18) from three different schools in a southern Ontario public board of education. Both questionnaire and interview findings were consistent across schools and genders.

Most students registered in senior secondary drama class elected to study drama because they enjoyed the subject and their classmates; most identified compulsory subjects (e.g., mathematics) as least enjoyable. The inclusion of drama in the curriculum motivated some students to attend school, despite their lack of enjoyment for mandatory curriculum components.

The intrinsic motivation of voluntarily studying an enjoyable subject with peers of similar interest cannot be discounted as a major factor in students’ willingness to engage enthusiastically in classroom activities. However, in both written and oral formats, students described classroom environments in which they felt motivated to attend class, achieve high expectations, and invest emotionally in their schoolwork. Although their experiences varied from school to school in terms of specific course content, academic level (advanced level in School B, open level in Schools A and C), and course length (double-credit in School B vs. single-credit in Schools A and C), their perceptions revealed no notable differences, either across genders or from site to site. Although performance projects varied in scope, content, and intended audience, students across schools and genders expressed similar feelings of pride, stress, and dedication.

The voices of senior drama students offer student-generated support for a pedagogy that embraces social constructivism and foregrounds human, non-mechanistic, elements of teaching and learning. Students praised enthusiastic teachers who challenged and encouraged them, allowed them choice and freedom within structured norms of routine and predictability, avoided talent-based student comparisons, and learned and worked alongside the class. According to Pelletier, Rheault, Charest, and Lammare (71), an educational approach that recognizes individual differences is a significant factor in improving student achievement. A focus on the human elements of teaching practice, the values teachers convey, as well as the quality of the teacher-student relationship all have profound influence on students. The art of successful drama pedagogy includes the dexterous and perhaps intuitive ability to gauge the precise amount of direct instruction that fosters rather than stifles student creativity and ownership of their work.

Echoing findings from investigations on student literacy, students enjoyed classroom opportunities for physical mobility and self-expression. Peterson (33), for example, has recommended that tapping into visual spatial strengths and allowing time for movement are instructional strategies supporting literacy initiatives. In an atmosphere of structured physical freedom, students readily accepted personally relevant learning tasks that demanded collaborative creativity while taxing current ability levels. They gained a sense of group identity, cohesion, and pride from displaying the
products of authentic learning tasks to audiences outside their own classrooms. More than curriculum learning, students valued drama as an opportunity for personal and social growth.

Senior secondary students have much to say about teaching and learning conditions and environments in their classrooms and schools. The current dearth of research focusing on their voices, in both drama classrooms and others, fails to acknowledge the instructive power of this immensely valuable resource.

References


