INTRODUCTION: “STAY A LONG TIME” (DELIA, FALL 2003)

When we entered one of our school research sites for the very first time, three years ago, we asked the group of 35 grade-11 students whether they had any advice for us as we began our research. This is after we had taken some time to explain to them that we were interested in understanding better how students worked in a drama classroom, how they related to one another, to their teacher, and how they saw themselves in the larger world of the school. A lone hand rose:

“You’d better stay a long time.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’d better stay a long time if you want to learn something about us or drama or school.”

Versions of this same piece of advice were echoed in the three other school sites in which we would spend the next three years researching. On day one, there it was. Clear direction from our youth participants to draw no hasty conclusions about who they are, how they work, or the place called school. If we wanted to learn something about students, we had better be prepared for the long haul.

The qualitative study that will provide the backdrop for this chapter has aimed to examine the experiences of youth in urban drama classrooms in order to develop a theoretical and empirically grounded account of the dynamic social forces of inclusion and exclusion experienced by adolescents within their unique contexts of public, urban North American schooling. Drama Education, Youth, and Social Cohesion: Re-constructing Identities in Urban Contexts is an ethnography of four urban sites—two in Toronto, two in New York City—particularly concerned with investigating the extent to which drama education in classrooms illuminates the intersections of youth’s personal/cultural lives with their school lives in the formation of their social, academic, and artistic identities.

Central to our understanding of, and indeed hope for, greater social cohesion and understanding of diversity among youth in schools is the notion of
conflict. Conflicts in drama become sites of struggle for divergent perspectives where notions of difference are played out in complex ways in secondary school classrooms. Students’ understanding of a dramatic world that is based on their experience of an actual world and their personal criteria for making judgments can be poignantly challenged by dramatic role-play. Through drama’s pedagogy, youth’s relevant worlds are brought into sharp relief. In our research, we have been asking such questions as: To what extent do the arts, and the dramatic arts in particular, support young peoples’ complex ways of becoming and belonging in school?; What relationship does ‘inclusion’ have with ‘achievement’?; Are there common characteristics that help us understand the social function of arts practices in schools?; Can these practices produce policy guidelines that better recognize the interplay between identity, social activity, and academic achievement or attend to the range of meanings we find in the social world of students in school?

Schools are fascinating and complex places, especially in times of heightened security and surveillance in North America, heightened attention generally to issues of safety, of who belongs, and who does not, and what we mean by ‘excellence’ and ‘global competitiveness.’ In coding our fieldnotes and interviews from the first phase (year one) of our study, we identified a broad theme we termed ‘Identity-Representation-Surveillance.’ This was a cluster of responses that linked ideas about the Self and Other, social controls, and (in)justice, and it was most prevalent in youth stories about how they suffer the negative consequences of stereotyping. As a set of student responses, we also took note of the central place of conflict in students’ stories about their social experiences in classrooms, with administration, and in schools generally. Moving into our second phase (year two), we were struck again by how impassioned the debate was around these issues for a new group of students—confirmation that it would be productive to look for a link between their concerns about how they are perceived, and treated accordingly, and the kind of experimentation with identity that drama education invites. The second phase of the study is, methodologically, rather distinct from the first phase as it has allowed us to go back into our school sites with the original data from the first year of the study. With new groups of drama students, we have attempted to corroborate and/or challenge our provisional analyses by inviting their explicit understanding and artistic interpretation through the use of data as dramatic text.

In this chapter, we will focus on the second phase of our research because it will allow us to examine in some detail what we mean by the claim that youth are engaged in a process of theorizing or myth-debunking about their own lives—that they are both attracted to and repulsed by prevailing stereotypes and theories of themselves. We accomplish this through a discussion of our
(dramatic) engagement with the youth in one of our Toronto schools that
provided a window onto some of the concerns youth have regarding their
school, their cultural lives, and their social relationships. Yon (2000), too, in
his ethnography of youth in a Toronto high school, found portraits of youth
identity that transgressed what we may expect as researchers in what he
described as the “often troubled relationship between cultural and personal
identity” (p. 21). What we especially hope to contribute, through this chapter,
is an account of a rather innovative and certainly unconventional research
approach that we risked in our research with youth. Not only were drama class-
rooms our destination, but drama, itself, soon became our primary research
method. Convinced that working in improvised drama made available certain
modes of communication, conduct, and embodiment, we were drawn toward
this research approach for the quality of talk and interaction that we thought it
would solicit and for the kind of new insight into students’ worlds we might
uncover. We further hope to demonstrate how this approach to research can
make good on the desire, articulated by many school-based researchers, to give
more authority to student voices in student research (see Fine & Weis, 2003;
Weis & Fine, 2000; Yon, 2000; Lesko, 2001; Thompson, 2002). Unlike the
more traditional methods of qualitative research, our analogous theatre world
would open up, we hoped, the possibility for critical engagement among stu-
dents themselves, a world that would make possible the generation of theory
through spontaneous talk, critical watching, and engaged action. Students are
always living by and challenging theories; our drama work provided a context
in which their theories could be articulated, tested, and reformulated.

Before moving into the account of the drama methodology that allowed us
to engage with students in challenging ways, we would like to identify a prob-
lem we have often found in the body of classroom-based empirical research
with youth/children and one we were concerned not to reproduce here. In an
effort to ‘give voice’ to young people, the data—young people’s words—are
often summoned as in a kind of ‘show and tell’ or a reality-test for those ideas
or discoveries we might well already hold as truths. Empirical research, in our
view, must hold itself to the rigorous intellectual inquiry so important to the
theorizing of the everyday, to the conceptual or philosophical as well as the
phenomenal realm. Too often, this ‘reality syndrome’ of empirical, class-
room-based research is devoid of the imagination and theoretical probing
necessary to produce new knowledge in the field. Often enough, the words
themselves, the citations culled to illustrate findings, do not, alone, articulate
the profound new ideas one would hope to bring to light. Too often, they are
left to stand in for what it is we already know. ‘Keeping it real,’ in other
words, often anchors researchers to only those things that can be or were
spoken in the given context. Seeing this as a caveat for ourselves, we will attempt in our recounting to resist this reductive form of reporting. We will aim to make theoretically and contextually rich the experiences we had with the youth in our study and to let their words not simply illustrate but also interact with the complexities of the research, the philosophical dimensions of our inquiry, and our own theoretical constructions as researchers.

METHODOLOGY REVISITED: “IF THEY KNEW WHAT THEY WANTED TO LEARN, THEY WOULDN’T NEED TO DO RESEARCH” (ALICIA, FALL 2003). When asked, by a student, what we were looking for in our research, Alicia replied even before we could ourselves. And it was brilliant. Naturally, if we knew what we wanted to find, we would not be doing research. What we knew, at this point, was that we needed to recapture the passion, the contradictions, the vehemence that we had witnessed on countless occasions in spontaneous classroom discussions when the students were not busy anticipating what we wanted to learn or being good research participants.

Drama as method requires that the researcher rethink the notion of observation in rather fundamental ways. This rethinking also privileges our sense of ethical responsiveness to the participants and the teachers of the classrooms in which we observe. In this way, we found it useful to shift from a concentration on observation as a method, per se, to a perspective that emphasizes, as Angrosino and de Perez (2000) describe it, “observation as a context for interaction among those involved in the research collaboration” (p. 676). The following sections will describe a process drama. We are using drama, as others have done (see Conrad, 2004; Norris, 2000), not only to present a research text in an endless variety of ways (see Gallagher, in press; Goldstein, 2003; Saldana, 1999; Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995; Mienczakowski, 1995; Norris, 1997) but also to generate data and engage co-researchers in forms of analysis. The revelations unearthed by/about youth, through their engagement with these methods, will be illuminated in the following discussion.

Writing our Subjectivities, Beginning with our Hypotheses: Moving Toward the Drama

When we began our work with the transcripts of interviews with students from Phase One, it was our intention to work with the new students of Phase Two as co-researchers of their experience in Drama class. We told them that we hoped to check our analysis of Phase One by seeing what they made of the same materials upon which we were basing our understandings. Only we were not
going to sit around and discuss these ideas, rather, because this was a Drama
class, we were going to treat these transcripts as pretexts for scenes they would
create on a chosen topic.

Though the data the groups were given represented a range of possible
themes, we noted that all three groups wound up creating scenes that dealt with
stereotyping. Considering the circumambience of the rhetoric in schools about
the injustice of stereotyping, we were hardly surprised to see the students
replicate these notions. We were, nonetheless, troubled by the extent to which
their scenes reinscribed a liberal, hegemonic notion of stereotyping as anti-
social behavior on the part of unfeeling individuals, rather than a systemic bias
of a sort students in this mostly non-White class would have experienced first
hand. Though not true in this particular instance, all too often in our experi-
ence as Drama educators we have seen such anti-stereotyping scenarios used
as a not-terribly-sly excuse for the public enactment, usually for comic effect,
of derogatory generalizations about marginalized groups. It was in the interest
of moving beyond such simplistic treatment of the evils of stereotyping that
we conjured up an exercise meant to personalize the phenomenon and, simul-
taneously, goad the students into widening the scope of their gaze to include
an analysis of how societal pressures are made manifest in the creation and
perception of their work.

Our strategy was to get them to ask, “Why do we stereotype?” and “What do
stereotypes accomplish?” Rather than recapitulate the official line on stereo-
typing, our approach was to expose the dynamic interrelation between our
sense of ourselves and what we think of others. Here we were consciously tak-
ing aboard feminist thinking with regard to how the Self/Other dialectic
informs our idea of what is possible and limits, or regulates, personal freedom.
The first step we took in this direction was to have the students write stream-
of-consciousness for 12 minutes from one of three prompts:

Nobody knows I’m . . .
People think I’m . . .
Because I am . . ., people think I . . .

From all appearances, both in observing them as they wrote in class and in
reading their responses, the students had little difficulty identifying the ways
in which perceptions do not match reality. Charlie, an Asian male, 19 years old,
writes, “Many people think I’m passive and that I’m weak. On first impres-
sion people think I’m just like any other Asian so they look over me.” The
kind of double-consciousness evident in these lines represents a quality of
introspection we did not see reflected in the students’ interpretations of the
previous year’s transcripts. Charlie is aware of how his acquiescence conforms
to prejudicial ideas of Asian males as weak; he is somehow less masculine for
his lack of bravado, and yet, because he understands this he is able to differ-
entiate himself from that preconception. Later in his writing, he explains
his quietness as “a trust issue that I have . . . it’s a way for me to protect
myself. I need to do this to feel secure. So in a way I am a very insecure
person.” While, or even through, comparing himself to the ideal of an outgoing
persona, he has come to terms with how his relative quiet functions as a pro-
tective measure in relating to others. Without claiming that stereotypes are on
the whole beneficial to an emerging sense of ourselves, we should acknowl-
edge that—as intransigent as the practice of prejudice is—we would be better
off finding what productive capacity lies within it. Admitting to ourselves that
stereotyping is not ever and always malignant, but rather more a habit of mind,
might interrupt the attendant discourse of taboo.

Anti-stereotyping campaigns shout the message “REMEMBER: NOT
ALL_____s ARE_____.” Enconced within this upbeat notice, however, is the
continued use of the very rubrics by which people have been traditionally
grouped, and oppressed, along with its implicit assumption that we are one
identifiable thing over time: a bully, a woman, elderly, smart, homosexual, etc.
Furthermore, that under the skin we are all alike, more similar than different;
that we are all individuals, not identifiable by other social characteristics, and
no mention is made of the way in which these categories are socially derived.
The process of becoming may be acknowledged as characteristic of the ado-
lescent experience, but the ways in which we are all “human becomings”
rather than “human beings” (Neelands, 2004) is not. One student’s writing,
a black female named Loralei, demonstrates a sensitivity to the importance
others place on labels:

Nobody knows I’m not existent (sic). People can see me but they don’t see the real me. (Not that
I would want them to.) When I say I’m none existent (sic) it is because I’m not ready to define who
or what I am in life. In society.

If you do not answer or aspire to an identifiable tag, you are then non-existent,
which, given the consequences of being something which another, perhaps
more powerful person or group despises, is not a bad choice. Like Ellison’s
(1995/1952) narrator in The Invisible Man, or de Beauvoir’s (1989/1952)
notion of the feminine as Other, Loralei’s status as a non-being recognizes the
threat implicit in choosing from among pre-assigned identities. She prefers to
remain unknown, unseen, and therefore unnamed. She says she’s not ready to
define who or what she is in life, and suggests the corollary: that she is not
ready, or willing, to be defined by others. Has her experience with the various
identities she has considered left her feeling that none fits? If so, our project
for her and her cohort is not to help them search through the scrap heap until
a more suitable one can be found but rather to encourage the active subversion
of these labels and to heighten their awareness about the amorphous, phantas-
mal quality of identity.

In Loralei’s strategic refusal to name what she is or even who she wants to
become there is a sense of the tragic inevitable: she seems to accept that event-
tually she will have to pick an identity, swapping a sense of the infinite for
a coherent social location. This strain of fatalism is echoed in the challenging
questions Sanjeeta, a South-Asian female, wrote: “What makes people judge
who I am? I judge them too. . . . But where in this judging do we find just what
we want? Do we judge to isolate or to belong?” If we answer “Both,” we move
closer to an acceptance of the role stereotyping plays in the social dynamics
not just in high school but also in most every subculture. As Gilman (1985)
puts it, “[t]he anxiety present in the self concerning its control over the world
directly engenders a need for a clear and hard line of difference between the
self and the Other” (p. 79). Personal development and social cohesion are
roughly analogous in this regard: the process of becoming aware of oneself
involves first separating off those parts one cannot accept or acknowledge
within oneself, and thus the anxiety of autonomous selfhood (viewing oneself
as a distinct, unchanging entity, not dependent upon others) both mirrors and
contributes to the social phenomenon of stereotyping and classifying people
into corresponding ranks.

Sanjeeta’s writing concludes with a resigned shrug, “I judge you, and you
judge me because that’s the way it has always been.” Her understanding of the
futility of making categorical statements about others seems to lead to a despair
of the practice ever abating. The important distinction to be made here, however,
is not whether people make judgments but rather how strong their belief in those
judgments is. Educators are in a position to ask students to question their
preconceived notions by presenting them with various conundrums in which
they are required to test their assumptions against their values and the experi-
ences of others. We would argue that Drama provides a robust environment
for such media res questioning, as our work deals in metaphor, recreating real-
life situations in which students are able to more freely experiment with alternate
strategies and perspectives in testing the validity of their proven theories.

YOUTH ENGAGED IN DRAMA RESEARCH

PROCESS DRAMA OR EXTENDED IMPROVISATION AND PLAY

Impressed by the depth of insight found in their automatic writing compared to
their short scenes based on the data from Phase I, we sought a way to engage the
students’ lived experiences of stereotypes through embodied dramatic work.
It was at this point that we devised a process drama, an extended improvisation activity, relating to our theme of Identity-Representation-Surveillance that, we hoped, would allow students to imaginatively enter into a created world that would ask them to both improvise and reflect upon their understandings of, and responses to, this imagined world. Henry (2000) persuasively argues that:

"The structures of qualitative research and of dramas take innovative forms in which means and ends, thought and action, intertwine in an unpremeditated, improvisational fashion. Both involve ways of knowing which people use in their everyday lives: existential knowledge. (p. 51)"

In one sense, we were asking students to relocate their stereotypical views of themselves and others into a mutually constructed world where their latent ‘theories’ might come into play.

While we would never argue that process drama or any other way of working is capable of transcending the environment in which it takes place, there are important lessons here about using drama structures to, at least temporarily, invert established school and research cultures. For example, in our initial attempts to elicit from the students what they know about their experience as students of Drama, and as high school students more generally, there was a perceived reluctance on most of the students’ part to volunteer too much information, lest they face the scrutiny of their peers or the further probing questions of researchers. In the imagined setting of the process drama that we created, however, the instinct is reversed: now the knowing student may find ample room to enact latent or uncomfortable truths. This might be because the nature of the information sharing is not explicit; the student is not required to raise her hand or shout, “I know, I know,” she simply engages with her fellow improvisers and both learns and demonstrates that her knowledge is sufficient to navigate in this new space. In Henry’s (2000) study of drama’s ways of learning, she makes this point rather succinctly: “In drama, people use themselves as media, in a reality located between subjectivity and objectivity, improvising to find meaning. They become media for learning” (p. 57). Students arguably have more control over how their input is perceived and/or taken up. This is, after all, a dialogue in which, just as in life, the point is to communicate, a project at once larger and more immediate than an overtly pedagogic one.iii

One might reasonably ask—given what we have said about process drama being such a robust tool—why did we not incorporate it from the very start in our research design for Phase II? Though we do not remember discussing the possibility beforehand, we agree now that it was most likely because we were uncomfortable abandoning the research frame and moving into the process drama, the art frame, until we discovered that such a move would allow us to stay
true to our theory-building. When it became evident that the Phase II data we
were collecting, interesting as it was, did not tell a story expressly about drama,
we concluded that we had to dive in and lead students through a dramatic explo-
ration based on the ideas brought forward in the classroom discussions. We
prized their dynamic conversations about social justice, Black History month,
and the problems with their school’s security policy that we had been privy to,
but dramas move differently than plain speech, and we now had an opportunity
to gauge that difference by improvising around these very topics. Through a sce-
nario suggested by our talks, we hoped to recreate how these ideas are lived, to,
at least, tease out the paradoxes and ironies that lay between thought and action.

Our work in this process drama confirmed our belief that young people build
theories of their own lives and, in our case, of their own dramatic art too; they do
this through their relationship to a context, to others, and through narrative sto-
ries and discursive contradictions, through interpersonal norms, strategies of
resistance and compliance, and group fidelity. Maxine Greene (2000) offers fur-
ther support for the strengths of a research paradigm that makes central the story
to be collaboratively told: “What may hold shared spaces together and bring
them closer to a public space may be in part the phenomenon of storytelling”
(p. 302). The students’ fictional characters/stories helped us to better follow their
meaning structures and, from time to time, enter into them.

Social Roles and Drama Roles: Entering the Fictional

Heading into the class, we knew this much of the fictional world we were
inventing: the students were going to be processed (i.e., fingerprinted and
located in “The System”—Dr. Gallagher’s laptop), and interviewed as part of
their 6-month probationary review at an unspecified workplace. Our goal was
to place them in the sadly familiar situation of being subjected to an arbitrary
bureaucratic system. Loralei readily recognized our intent:

it actually does happen all the time . . . You feel like . . . you feel like a number basically. You just
go through it just to get it done, and then you just make a scene just because there’s no other way
to react. You just want some kind of justice, some kind of answers. So you flip out. Like, there’s
nothing else to do. It’s not like you can leave, ‘cause you need the money. And you’re frustrated,
and you get mad.

The only other element we pre-set was that afterwards the students would be
asked to write in role to the Director of Personnel to register their thoughts
about how they were treated in the course of their review. The students were
given a faint outline of what was to transpire before entering into role.
Somewhat cryptically, Dr. Gallagher asked that those who had a picture I.D.
be prepared to present it when requested to. With that, we left the room.
Upon entering the classroom anew, this time in role as two professionals decidedly uninterested in any inconvenience this procedure might cause, we instructed the ‘employees’ to line up and remain quiet. They were then brought, one at a time, to be processed, that is, to be fingerprinted and to have their I.D. cards scanned into The System. The Processor, Dr. Gallagher, meted out an arbitrary justice, telling some whose names were not found in The System to go back in line, some to come back tomorrow, and others to go on through for an interview. Those employees who voiced disapproval or disbelief at the shoddiness of their treatment quickly learned that her decisions were final and not open to appeal. Those students lucky enough to make it through to the Interviewer, Mr. Lortie, were questioned on subjects both professional and personal. At the Interviewer’s hands, the employees experienced equitable treatment as well and were treated with suspicion whenever their responses did not accord with the facts found in their file.

In what follows, we strive to bring you some flavor of the events in the classroom that day through snippets of interactions transcribed from a video recording. As faithful as we have been in setting this down, it would be impossible to accurately recreate what happened or to offer what we could plausibly call a full accounting of the process drama. For one, the video camera, modern-day marvel that it is, is ever a Cyclops, and it does not address the researcher’s most persistent shortcoming: an inability to be in more than one place at one time. Two, as the grounds of the process drama were established through a few initial encounters, the students rather quickly abandoned the orderly discipline of a teacher-directed model and began to carry the drama into their encounters with each other. The reader should picture the energy generated by a successful classroom lesson, in which any prospect of the teacher controlling or tracking the students’ participation is gleefully thrown over in favour of a shared sense of excitement about what will happen next. And, at the risk of repeating ourselves, we remind the reader of our caveat in the introduction, to wit, selecting these excerpts and not others necessarily distorts and biases this account of events. These quotes, therefore, should not be read as any more real or accurate than an account we could provide; rather, they are here as artifacts whose meanings are not settled upon but provide noteworthy details or stood out for us as moments in which more than the obvious was being communicated.

It did not take long for the student actors to pick up on the fecklessness with which we were conducting the processing and review procedures. Kevin, a confident performer, was pulled out by the Processor before his interview began and told to wait. Kayla, another strong performer, was told to go ahead of him for an interview, which itself was interrupted by the Processor asking the Interviewer whether a piece of identification from another student was valid and being told that it was not. Seeing this, Kevin engages Kayla.
Kevin: (Black, Afro-Caribbean, male, student) Excuse me Miss, you should go back to the end of the line. You are wasting everyone’s time, you don’t have proper identification.

Kayla: (Black, Afro-Caribbean, female student) Uh, they’re talking about someone else.

Sabicca: (Black, Afro-Caribbean, female student) You better be quiet, because you never got fingerprinted.

Kevin: Yes I did.

Sabicca: No you didn’t. You went right from the line to the chairs.

Though, admittedly, this encounter does not leap off the page, there are a number of significant dramatic elements at play here. First, Kevin improvises with Kayla around his character’s impatience to be interviewed, a tremendously helpful move for the life of the drama as it provides continuity in action from his being plucked out of the interviewee’s chair. We might ask, how much does Kevin’s own eagerness to perform prompt this dialogue? Up to that point, Dr. Gallagher had been most often calling on the less active members of the class by selecting them for processing and interviewing ahead of the regular contributors, and this might have added to Kevin’s frustration at being told to wait. If so, here is an example of how the real-life classroom dynamics facilitate the maintenance of a fictional world and are therefore open to being probed within the remove of pretense.

Witness to all this was Sabicca, a student who, because she lacked the correct identification, had been told by the Processor to leave the line-up and take a seat at a physical remove—behind the chairs in the ‘waiting room.’ Sitting outside the action she might have understood her role as audience and been content to passively watch the events unfold around her. Not Sabicca. She quickly took up the role of Chorus, loudly declaiming every injustice. Her above exchange (and the one following) show how fully engaged she was in the action even after being deliberately sent to the sidelines. The point here is that the action of a sustained drama is continuous and self-sustaining. Sabicca became a vital part of the drama because she quickly understood that the rigidity of roles normally associated with classrooms, even much of what goes on in Drama classrooms (e.g., Audience, Performer, Director, etc.) does not obtain within a whole-class improvisation. She vocalized her responses to what she was seeing, which in turn influenced the action and further defined our imagined space.

Adel: (White, female eastern European) Are we getting paid for this?

Doug: (White, male, British descent) Yeah, we’re employees.

Adel: Because I am losing my hours. What is going on? What am I doing here? (Turns to Sabicca, who has been indicating her agreement.)
Sabicca: That’s a good question. (To Processor) Are we getting paid for this? Because if we’re not, I mean, I can go back to work.

Processor: This is part of your... Well, you may not have work to go back to.

Sabicca: Right, but are we getting paid right now?

Processor: No, no this is not part of your working hours.

Sabicca: It’s not. (rising anger) So I’m not getting paid for this? Oh okay, thank you very much. (Starts to leave.)

Sabicca, as Chorus, echoes and amplifies Adel’s concern about pay, bringing what is a valid and realistic question to the attention of the Processor and the entire group. Eventually, the student-actors will galvanize around this unpaid interruption in their workday and it will lead to a culminating conflict between the employees and their supervisors.

Meanwhile, Kayla’s interview proceeds. She is immediately held to account, within the drama, and recovers nicely.

Interviewer: What department are you in?

Kayla: (Straining to hear over the noise) Excuse me?

Interviewer: What department are you in?

Kayla: I don’t know... I just started, nobody told me anything.

Interviewer: Hah! (To Processor, loudly.) She doesn’t know what department she’s in! (Laughs, rest of class is momentarily quieted, then begin to react to Interviewer’s display of contempt.)

Processor: (To everyone waiting in line for interview.) We’re assuming everyone knows what department they’re in. (To individual employee.) Do you know what department you’re in?

Interviewer: You don’t know what department you’re in. Where do you go every day? (Pause.) This is a six-month review, you have been coming to work for six months and you don’t know what department you’re in?

Kayla: It’s not my fault.

Interviewer: What do you mean it’s not your fault?

Kayla: Because I am an employee, the employer is supposed to send me there.

Interviewer: Kayla Ford... now I have to look through the alphabetical list. (Pause, looking for her name on list.) Okay you’re in Gardening, just for future reference, you’re in Gardening. You know all those flowers and stuff? That’s what you do.
Kayla’s not knowing, or rather, not having prepared, the answer to the Interviewer’s question spurs a dramatic encounter, which again develops the action in productive ways. Two lessons are taught here: one, if you don’t know it, make it up; two, everything that happens, happens within the drama. More reluctant students may understand this to mean that there is ‘no way out,’ which is true to a degree, but, as Kayla’s responses demonstrate, it also means that acting within a process drama turns on imagination rather than talent, listening rather than proclaiming. The interview concludes:

Interviewer: (Looking over Manager’s report.) Okay well this is fairly consistent... You are giving your manager Monique quite a bit of resistance. She says that you also, several times after work, have been seen loitering around the building.
Kayla: (Very serious, surprised.) Loitering around? That’s funny. Every time I’m here I am working.

[Filming interrupted.]
Kayla: If I am not shown respect, I will not give respect.

Interviewer: Okay, well that attitude is going to be problematic in a place like this. The customer comes first. If you expect the customers to hold your hand, and bat their eyelashes at you, it’s not going to happen.

The notion of respect that Kayla’s character enunciates brings to mind difficulties today’s high school teacher typically encounters when taking an authoritarian stance with regard to classroom conduct. Not shown in the above excerpt is a passage where the Interviewer presented Kayla’s character with numerous complaints relating to her discourteous treatment of customers, most of which she did not dispute. In defending her actions by implying that she had not been shown the proper respect by customers, she (once again) flipped the situation around so that culpability lay elsewhere. Whether this is a character choice, or a reflexive one, it matters not: we arrived at a point in our exchange where the student was thrown into a complicated situation and needed to think her way out of it, fast. Not surprisingly, the heat of the moment swept us into ambiguous territory where our fabricated setting held real-world implications. Put another way, the dramatic crisis pushed Kayla to test out a notion of respect popular among her peers and allowed her to experience the outcome within the safety of a fictional setting.

In this particular iteration, anyway, she may have learned that its power is not subtle: the interview concluded with her dismissal from the Company.

Kevin learns from Kayla’s interview and comes prepared with more than just the name of his department; he embodies a character who, for a reason familiar only to him, is dissatisfied with his job.
Interviewer: How has it been going? Is everything okay?
Kevin: Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I work in kitchen appliances, so I guess it’s alright.
Interviewer: It doesn’t sound like you’re very happy there.
Kevin: Well, it’s not exactly what I saw myself doing.
Interviewer: And what is it that you would like to be doing?
Kevin: I want to be in entertainment, I’m an actor.
Interviewer: Well, would you like to sell televisions?
Kevin: That’s not really a step towards making it in entertainment.
Interviewer: Well, I don’t know about that, you get to sell TVs, videos, CDs . . .
Kevin: I don’t want to sell TVs, I want to be on TV. I don’t want it to be in my face every day at work.
Interviewer: (Looking over his file.) Well what you’re saying is consistent with what your managers have written here. When you care you do a great job, but a lot of the time you seem to be out of it—you’re unprepared, apathetic. So they want to remind you that every day counts, this is real life. You have to come here ready to work. If you want to make it in entertainment, that’s a very competitive area, you are going to have to get some discipline.

To pick up on our analysis of the previous interview with Kayla, we suggest that Kevin is also testing out a theory, that of himself as a frustrated performer, someone who must reconcile his dreams of stardom with the everyday reality of going to work selling kitchen appliances. What happens when you make this struggle known to your employer? To yourself? Remarkably, Kevin’s character remains open to working for the Company, resisting any urge to vault the confines of the drama to declare that he is leaving today to make a brand new start of it.

Kevin: So . . . what is going to happen here?
Interviewer: If they see improvement, you’re off probation, you’ll be a full employee, get full benefits, but if the problems continue . . . (blows a ‘raspberry’).
Kevin: I thought I was off probation, I’ve been on probation for eight months.
Interviewer: Well, we have the right to keep you on probation for a year, so . . . it looks like that what’s going to happen. Four more months of
probation. If you can show up every day, professional, smile on your face,
you’ll be a full-fledged member of this company.

(Kevin nods, they shake hands.)

Interviewer: Best of luck, Mr. Matthews.

A memorable, poignant interaction that transpired quietly within the escalating
action of the drama. The Interviewer scoffs at this character’s aspirations by
suggesting a transfer to the Electronics department might fulfill them, and
Kevin’s restraint conveys, even on the page, an awareness of how vulnerable
a dream makes you.

Finally, we conclude this section with a moment that signaled the end of
our role-play. Loralei, tired and frustrated at having waited in line the entire
time without ever being processed or interviewed, can no longer tolerate the
injustice. She bellows out her objections, attracting the attention of everyone
in the room, and is eventually backed by a semi-circle of employees as she
leads the charge against the Processor and Interviewer.

Loralei (Black, African, female student): (Loud and angry) It’s not our fault
that you do not know how to run your company, Sir! We have been standing
here for two and a half hours!

Interviewer: If you don’t have identification tomorrow, you won’t be seen.
We spent a lot of time today dealing with people who did not have I.D.

Classroom Teacher: Will we get our identification back?

Interviewer: We do have some I.D. that we have reason to believe is false
identification, so if you need that I.D. back, come back at 9:00 a.m.
tomorrow.

Huge outcry. The Processor and Interviewer pack up to leave. They inform every-
one that they are now going to take lunch, so the employees can either wait here
or leave and come back in 90 minutes. They exit the room, and the drama ends.

To the very last, our intent as Processor and Interviewer was to treat the
employees with a disinterested discourtesy while forcing them to succumb to
the privations of a badly-executed security and employment review. In doing
so, we anticipated that we could shape events in such a way that it would be
nearly impossible for the students to participate, at whatever level, without
making sense of a) why they were here in the first place, b) their reaction to
what was happening, and c) the implications (both personal and social) of
going through such an experience. In retrospect, these dramatic goals neatly
correspond to our goals as researchers inquiring into the knowledge students
produce in drama class, an equivalence which, in our view, bolsters the argu-
ment for moving our research inside the art experience itself.
Shifting into role, we moved inside the questions; we went from asking, “How does it make you feel when . . .?” and “What would you do if . . .?” to the matter itself. Because we did so, the students were faced with choices not just about how to react but also about who they were enacting, obviously paying close attention to the “aesthetics of self and questions of self-stylization” (Peters, 2001, cited in Besley, 2003, p. 80). In this meta-context, they were, in effect, “living out the drama of the post,” as Best and Kellner (2003) describe it, an era which has produced “… novel social conditions for today’s youth who are engaging innovative and challenging cultural forms, and a dramatically worsening economic and political situation, and ever more complex and unpredictable life” (p. 80). By the rules of improvisation, however, their choices are responded to differently inside a drama than they would be outside. What is the quality of that difference? Simply put, it is the difference between an offer and a statement, a possibility and a position. Within the drama the students are thinking diligently about what, in their experience, is relevant to this scene and what responses they could have. This is entirely different from the conventional research interview process, including those that aim to address the unhealthy separation between those who know and those who do not (Kvale, 1996), in the interview exchange. ‘Interviewing,’ within a sustained improvisation, this analogous world, allows the researcher to consider carefully what ‘listening to’ might mean. For youth, story and story-telling become an especially powerful means of communicating. If narrative knowledge is embodied in story-telling (Lyotard, 1984), the better question to ask, perhaps, is how, as researchers, do we enter into young people’s fictions and re-tellings? The sense of play and experimentation within the drama allows for much greater freedom, yes, but it would be a mistake to think of this solely in terms of a lack of seriousness. The energy in the room was unmistakable: it was the high you get doing something that feels simultaneously easy and real, completely made up and utterly familiar, strange and true.

THE WRAP-UP: WHAT YOUTH MADE OF THEIR WATCHING AND DOING

In this section, we look at the students’ responses to the process drama, first by recounting moments from a whole-class discussion we had with them three weeks later (after viewing a videotape of the drama), and second, by excerpting letters they wrote, in role as employees, immediately after the drama ended. The quotes we have selected from the group interview may help elucidate how students build theories of their lives through the defining of a unique perspective, through establishing relationships as dictated by the terms of the drama, and in the myriad ways in which they perform their personae within
and outside the drama. Our first example illustrates how we can use dramatic structures to identify the various uses of stereotyping discussed earlier.

Mr. Lortie asks Kevin why he was giving Kayla a hard time after she was brought into the interview ahead of him.

Kevin: I just wanted to get in and get out, I guess that was what my character was. Just get in and get out, you know? Had to do my stuff, kind of, and go back to work.

Loralei: Yeah, he was a snobby guy, eh?

Kevin: I had to take it out on you guys, because my life wasn’t good, you know?

Loralei: He was the ‘rich guy,’ but I was like if you’re so damn rich, why do you work here?

Kevin: I wasn’t rich, I wasn’t rich!

Doug: Yeah that was so funny, it was made up in two seconds. You weren’t actually the rich guy at the beginning, you just became that guy. And you guys (Loralei and Sabicca) didn’t know he was that guy, you just assumed it.

First of all, we must make clear that this notion of Kevin’s character being rich was new to us. This must have been the result of some byplay between the student-actors that we were not privy to. If we read this correctly, especially Doug’s account, it seems that Loralei and Sabicca explained Kevin’s haughtiness as an outgrowth of his wealth. Kevin protests, explaining that he was misconstrued; he was treating everyone so poorly because he was unhappy with his life (the reasons for which we learned in the interview). Here, the theory that someone who is wealthy can afford to treat others disrespectfully, or the converse, that the economically dependent lack the freedom of such expression, is being tested. This encounter gives us an entrée to question Kevin as to what it feels like to be (mis)labeled, as well as to ask Loralei and Sabicca to reflect on what drove them to assume that Kevin’s character was rich. Finally, Doug’s third-party account of what happened, testament to his close observation within the welter of events, suggests how easily students read into the events they are depicting and watching at the same time. The drama, lacking an author per se and an audience/performer duality, allows the participants (“spect-actors,” in Boal’s (1992) coinage, see Schutzman & Cohen Cruz, 1994) to devise their own readings and strategies. We discuss this facet of our work in greater detail below.

The following exchange stands out for us an example of how fluid the boundaries are between the social performance in the classroom and the performance...
within the drama. After some indecipherable discussion, Mr. Lortie mentions
that some employees were off to the side commenting on the action. Sabicca,
our Chorus, picks up on this immediately.

Sabicca: I wanted to know what happened to him, I wanted to know what
did he say to him.

Mr. Lortie: Yeah, you were the one who was like, “Now wait, there were
three people, three people have been let through.” Like you were keeping
track of everything that was happening.

Sabicca: That’s exactly what I do, I always keep track.

Mr. Lortie: Your whole thing was you were looking for justice.

Sabicca: Yes I was, there wasn’t any though.

Mr. Lortie: You were saying this is unfair.

Sabicca: It was unfair. It was completely unfair. Because one guy didn’t
have I.D., and he got in before people with I.D. got in, and he got accepted
for a job. And I was like, “What the Hell?!” And I was like, “I have been sit-
ting here for how long??” And then Charlie went before me, I was the only
one without I.D. that didn’t go. And then that came at the end, and then you
guys gave me a hassle. You said I have to go to Human Resources. I was
like, “Oh what the Hell, Human Resources, where? I’ve been here for so
long, they’ll put me on hold again? No, I want the answer right now!”

Noisy reaction from several students.

Kevin: (Smiling mischievously. To Sabicca.) Coming unprepared, and
always wanting to get in front, like, shut up.

Sabicca: Get in front?!! See that’s the attitude I’m talking about. (General
laughter.) I didn’t say I couldn’t wait; I would wait, but the fact that people
were going before me and I came before them and they didn’t have I.D.
either . . . that was unfair. So shut the hell up! (Everyone laughs.)

A fascinating shift occurs during Sabicca’s recounting: she becomes upset all
over again at the memory of being relegated to the back of the line time and
again, and she seems to enter back into that context (as suggested by a shift
from past to present tense). Kevin responds in kind by chastising her character
for coming unprepared and expecting equitable treatment. He clearly does this
to get a rise out of her, and Sabicca reciprocates with the same exaggerated
venom she directed towards Kevin’s character in the drama itself. Despite the
levity, this is a picture of students taking their learning seriously. They are
exploring the basis for claims of privilege, justice, the influence of perception
on reality, and the meaning-making of individuals and the collective. And
although this dialogue involves one-upmanship, it is on its most basic level a collaboration, a tango in the space between two selves and their personae.

Some of the letters the students wrote to the Director of Personnel after the drama reflected the ways in which the students were free to experiment with the reality of what we did within the process drama, trying on new or only minutely altered versions of themselves in their response to the whole-class activity. But something else came through in the reading of these letters—how keenly the students had to watch what unfolded in order to find a role for themselves within the drama.

LETTER #1
This letter is to inform you of the awful treatment my co-workers and I were forced to endure simply to keep our positions within this organization. Now, two weeks after the so-called review, I have received a letter stating that I have been dismissed without an explanation. I’ve tried contacting the manager and even the store owner but neither one has gotten back to me so I took the next step by writing you this letter. It would be really appreciated if I could further discuss with you all of my complaints.

LETTER #2
I would like to address the employee review, which took place several weeks ago, as I have some concerns with the events that occurred. Employees were rounded up and taken to an interview, during which we were fingerprinted without consent. Every employee that was brought to the interview was not paid for the time we spent there. Many employees had identification that was seized.

LETTER #3
I’ve recently found a letter in my mail regarding my termination of employment. I am very confused to how this has happened. Over the past five months I have consistently showed up on time for work and I’ve reached all of my weekly sales goals.

LETTER #4
My name is Alicia G——, my worker number is 93210486. I’ve just been notified through the mail that I’ve been terminated. I’ve done nothing wrong that I’m aware of. I need this job, I have 2 kids and a new born baby to feed. . . . Please don’t do this to me. It’s not right. I bust my ass from Monday to Friday 9 to 5 and sometimes I work overtime please don’t do this to me.

Seamlessly woven into their accounts, the details they provide buttress their complaints about the ineffectiveness of the probationary review process and lend authenticity to their view of the fictive events. Such extension of the dramatic moment underscores claims regarding the rich potential of role play in the classroom, but, more importantly, clouds simplistic distinctions between active and passive, doing and watching, being and seeing that importantly nuance our observations as researchers of students in classrooms. Of particular interest to us were the ways in which the binaries, and the subversion of these familiar binaries, challenge the researcher/researched relationship in provocative ways.
These letters suggest the complexity of how observation can and might function in qualitative research. We would like to identify two possible research benefits of attending to how students observe each other. School-based researchers, in thinking about field observation, can refine their methods by asking such questions as: How will the students be viewing each other? Will their watching be active or passive? To what extent will their responses to what they see be taken up by the rest of the class? Is there fluidity in the activity between doing and watching? This last point can help establish whether traditional classroom regimens are being replicated in the research relationship and to what extent they may be determining the social relations in the room. Giving youth the opportunity to make their own meaning from what they see—and to have that meaning contribute to the group’s collective efforts—counteracts, to some extent, traditionally hierarchical research relationships.

Research through theatre engagement offers another interesting insight into the research relationship. In a theatrical moment of pure improvisation, there transpires an existential moment in which I watch you become something different through the device of my watching. Neither of us initiates an action per se, both of us are merely responding to what the other is doing/seeing, and this is how we make something out of nothing. Working collectively within an imaginary context, all watchers are both a party and witness to a transformation. Of particular significance in this co-construction of meaning is the extent to which issues of identity and social groupings can be engaged not as static, categorical entities but rather as contingent, negotiated, and largely the product of the more ritualized, less examined performance of our everyday lives. For our purposes, therefore, the identity play we associate with adolescence becomes, in Drama class, a site for overt manipulation, contemplation, and discussion. The stereotypes we hold onto, furthermore, become inspiration for new modes of thinking and acting. Lather (1986) has suggested a different measurement for validity of research: “the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (p. 272). We found this particular criterion for validity to be rigorously met in the context of our drama engagement.

Interviewing: Reflection on a Shared Experience

We conducted a round of interviews with six students on March 29th, 2004, after our classroom visits with this group had concluded. We grouped the questions we had into four categories: i) school, identity, and representation; ii) drama class; iii) process drama; and iv) thoughts on research. Interviewees were selected to represent diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and sexual identities, plus one student who asked to be interviewed. Three
research assistants—Mr. Lortie among them—took turns asking questions, and the sessions were videotaped.

Of interest to us is the students’ shared sense of Drama as a class in which typical school relations are suspended. We closely attended to this particular observation made by students, especially in light of Lesko’s (2001) study of adolescence in which she posed the question, “Why are secondary schools such unpleasant, hostile, and humiliating places for so many students?” (p. 172). Certainly, the physical environment, with its open space, frequent use of student circles in which everybody sees, and is seen by, everyone else, and (in this instance) a ‘no shoes on the carpet’ policy interrupts normal school procedure, or, at least, hearkens back to the primary classroom. Due to the prevalence of the impression among students of Drama as a more casual, social setting within the school, we wanted to hear from them what effect they thought this had on their experience of school overall. Adel, a White, eastern-European, new immigrant, offers a rather typical response:

Dominique (Black, female research assistant): Do you think that taking Drama has changed or affected the way you think about high school in general?

Adel: Yeah, because normally sometimes in Drama you talk to people you would not normally talk to and you find out stuff about them. Maybe you had some kind of stereotype, too. You just get rid of stereotypes.

Dominique: Right. Um, so do you think, have you ever felt that you have been stereotyped in school, or have you ever seen people behaving in a way that you think that they may be stereotyping some people in school?

Adel: Yes, maybe sometimes.

Dominique: Do you want to elaborate on that a little bit?

Adel: Elaborate. (Pause.) They think that if you speak bad English that they . . . people just stereotype kind of what color you are, where you come from, if you are Russian they think some stuff about you, but they don’t necessarily know you. It happens but not really a lot. Adel’s response makes explicit the connection some students draw between Drama and the school at large: if this kind of collaboration and relaxed social intercourse is possible here, why not elsewhere? The experience of being thrown together with others not of your choosing and being asked to create collaboratively intensifies the need to engage in a conversation—spoken or otherwise—about differences. Juni, an East Asian new immigrant male offers,
Phil (White, male research assistant): Does the experience of taking Drama affect how you think about high school?

Juni: For me it did, because before I took drama class, this year is the first time I ever took drama and before that I had little confidence. I don’t dare to talk to anybody else in my class and because I don’t know I might have this trauma I have to start over and nobody can talk to me and I can’t talk to anybody, so I guess I have a little shadow there. But ever since I start taking drama, I build my confidence and people were kind to me and I guess I open up and accept more people . . . I guess it helped me a lot to understand that high school isn’t this big jungle that you go in and you just make sure you come in the end that’s it. But now I see it is more of a playground and anybody can be your friend.

Utopias aside, we assert that Juni has been provided with a new narrative, a new way to imagine himself as he walks through the halls and the students gathered in those halls. Drama did not do this; rather, its mediated, suspended quality made possible situations in which Juni’s own capacity for self-representation (or self-deceit) was reflected back to him by his peers. That is, the drama room became the staging area for a host of explicit demonstrations of the elasticity and negotiated nature of social relations and of identity, a place to disprove ‘proven’ theories and debunk myths.

Given that Lesko (2001) argues convincingly in her study that there is increasingly less tolerance for a broad range of social roles for secondary students, and further that our very schooling practices might be largely to blame for this, we became especially interested in understanding how the students made sense of how their role playing affected their ideas of who they are and their perceptions of others. Again, Kayla, a Black female offered a familiar commentary:

Dominique: We just wanted to know what if felt like to write in role to Betty, the Human Resources person, about that whole experience.
Kayla: Um, I don’t really remember what I wrote so I don’t know.
Dominique: That’s okay.
Kayla: But like I dunno, I like doing and being someone that I’m not. I dunno it gives me a chance to view things from a different perspective I guess.
Dominique: So when you were in role in that Drama you were not being you, you were in role as someone else?
Kayla: Yeah, I was kinda rude.
In taking on a role, students may give themselves permission to manifest parts of themselves they consider less attractive but more in keeping with their true reactions to the situation at hand. In this way, they are able to dissemble productively, not without consequences, but in the name of playing along, going with the flow. Respondents repeatedly stated that they took part in the drama when they saw others around them “getting into it.” This leap of imagination has very real social aspects and responds to the dynamics of the classroom, even while it may appear to be transgressing them. It is the quality of interaction in the improvised moment of creation between actors that fosters a form of communication not typical of the regimented social roles allocated to high school students.

The Student Interview Protocol: ‘Co-researcher’ Revisited

Our persistent interests in engaging our students as co-investigators in this inquiry compelled us to invite them to devise their own final interview protocols, which they would then use to interview one another. They worked out three specific questions in pairs. We set the room up so that there were two long rows of chairs facing each other. The paired students would both ask, and respond to, the questions they had devised. We videotaped this session.

It goes without saying that they taught us a great deal by the mere questions that they deemed significant to ask as our research project with this group was coming to a close. We watched them take over the class and expertly interview each other. A few of the exchanges are cited here at some length:

Adel (White, female, European descent) to Annie (Black, female, Afro-Caribbean descent): Did drama show you how different everyone’s perspectives on life are, and why?

Annie: Yeah, it did. Through our discussions and acting stuff out, I sort of realized where people’s priorities were, what was important to them and, which was, in some cases, a lot different than me.

Misha (White, eastern-European, male, new immigrant) to Juni (East Asian, male, new immigrant): Do you get anything from this experience?

Juni (quite emotional): Well, I got a lot from this experience: for instance, I learn to better communicate and I learn to listen better and uh, also I gained a lot of experience, a lot of valuable experience (chokes up a little). I don’t think I’ll ever forget it . . . , yeah.

Juni (to Misha): So, have you enjoyed this whole experience?

Misha: I actually did, I . . . came really open, like you know, when people like, because I came here, I’m kind of new here to Canada, I’m kind of scared, like, sometimes to speak, like, cause when I talk, because, you
know, like, sometimes people can make fun of my language, and, like, but
here, I, like, feel, like, so open, and, like, we have a lot of fun, like, and
play, like, a lot of games, and, like, I, like, to, like, learn a lot of things,
that’s all.

Greta (White, female, British descent) to Doug (White, male, British
descent): How do you feel about the interacting between you and your
peers in the class?

Doug: I feel good. But, like, it’s like . . . it’s like a chilling class.

Greta: Can you elaborate on that?

Doug: I look forward to this class more than I do other classes because
of the interaction with my peers . . . I don’t know, I act so much I can’t
even tell anymore, it’s always there. I’m always personally gratified.

Doug: Ok, well, uh, what kind of personal gratification do you get from
acting?

Greta: Well, I don’t know. My personal gratification is, it’s kind of like . . .
a moment, it’s just like a moment where you get to pretend to be
someone else, you get to take on a character, someone who you normally
wouldn’t take on, or someone you don’t agree with, or someone whose
values aren’t the same as yours, but you get to become that person and try
to make them seem as real as possible, and I think, if that works out, it’s
very gratifying.

Doug: Hmm . . . That was great, that’s cool.

Loralei (Black, female, African) to Sabicca (Black, female, Afro-Caribbean):
What is it about drama class that gives students their self-esteem?

Sabicca: Oh yeah, that’s my question and I can’t even answer it! (laughs)
Wow. So, . . . you want to take this one, Dr. Phil? (looks at Phil, laughing,
everyone laughs) . . . self-esteem, . . . wow . . . You know what it is?
I think this class builds character and character kind of, you know, I took
this class, first, to, uh, kind of build my character. I took on the play, just
to build my character, right? (Doug laughs and mutters, “Upgrading?” to
her. Sabicca turns towards Doug, nods, and continues). Yeah, you know?
Just to upgrade myself, but then I started liking the play and enjoying it
you see . . . I got a whole new, I got to a whole different level of self-
estem after doing the play, so, . . . I don’t know what it is...you know?
I don’t know . . . it’s something that’s unexplainable. It’s kind of like faith
[pronounces it as “fate”]: you know it’s there but you can’t see it. I don’t
know what it is. I can’t explain it. It’s just there and you know it.
Loralei: Wow.

Sabicca: Ok Loralei, when students walk out of this class, why is it that it’s a different story when you walk out of here? When you walk out through those doors right there, why is it different? Why do things change? Can you explain that to me?

Loralei: Um, I have to keep my focus here, but it’s really hard, um...

Sabicca: Yeah, try to keep your focus, focus on the question.

Loralei: Ok. Um, I think that... it’s a different story because it truly is a different world out there. It’s a different world out there even though it’s the same exact building, you know, there’s other classes, but, it really is, like, a different world out there. Everything is, like... In other classes, especially compared to drama, everything is pre-organized, like, the teacher has a lesson plan for you; you have to do this; you have to do that; yeah, they know you know to copy notes from the board, whatever, but, like, in drama, when you come in, like, even the teacher might not know what she’s going to do (Teacher and everyone laughs), you know what I mean? No offense or anything to you Miss! (laughs, others too). I think it really helps that, you know, like here you’re really able to be like, in the spur-of-the-moment, you know? You’re able to make spontaneous decisions as opposed to other classes, where it’s organized, you do it, it’s given to you, you know? It’s kind of like the cafeteria menu. You go to the cafeteria, like, that’s all the food that there is, if you don’t like anything, you don’t have a choice, that’s what they’re going to serve, you know what I mean? So...

Sabicca: You feel restricted.

Loralei: Exactly, right. It’s very restrictive, so that’s why I like drama. It’s actually a freer environment, so, that’s what makes it different when you walk out those doors.

Sabicca: Ok, so, a freer environment.

Loralei: Yes.

Sanjeet (South-Asian, female from India): Can I add to that?

Sabicca: Ok, go ahead.

Sanjeet: I don’t think it’s necessarily that drama teachers don’t plan, I just think it’s that they’re more open than other teachers to...

Loralei (interrupting): That’s what I was saying, that it’s a freer environment.

Doug: Not all the time.
Loralei: No.

Sabicca (addressed to all her classmates): Can we stay focused here? This is my interview. Oh yeah, this is the Sabicca Show now, forget Oprah! (laughs).

Students start shouting: “Sa-bi-cca! Sa-bi-cca! Sa-bi-cca!” (as talk-show audiences do when they’re welcoming their host).

Sabicca: (laughs) See? That’s the freeness I’m talking about! And now, can I get some quiet please? What is it about drama class that gives students their self-esteem?

Loralei: Ok. Gives students their self-esteem . . . I’m not a cocky person but I am confident. There’s a lot of people who get the two mixed up.

Sabicca: Right.

Kevin (Black, male, Afro-Caribbean) (interrupting): Thank you, thank you, I appreciate it!

Loralei: Just because you’ve got confidence doesn’t mean that you’re cocky, you know what I mean? And, um, for me, already . . . I don’t know where I get it from, I really don’t, but, like, um, ok.

Bell rings.

Teacher: Please stay 5 minutes extra.

Loralei (resuming): What also helps build other people’s self-esteem in drama class is when they, cause, like, when you’re a teenager, it’s really hard to trust other people, especially adults, and especially people with authority because they also take advantage of you, so, and it’s just as hard to trust your peers as it is to trust those people, so drama class, I find, because this is, like, my second year—I took it in grade 11 and this is grade 12—um, I notice that, like, it’s really important to trust your peers, and once you can do that, I think that you’re much more prone to have confidence, because people are egging you on, they’re supporting you, do you know what I mean? So, it helps you build your confidence. It helps you to build your self-esteem and confidence in that way, and because you have to perform, you have to be in that situation, it helps you because once you’re up there, you know, it’s your time, it’s your show, it’s your time to shine, do you know what I mean? And you don’t get a lot of opportunities to do that, so I think that helps you to build your self-esteem.

Sabicca: Thank you, have a good day, (said in the manner of a talk-show hostess, ending the show. Doug leads the same “Sa-bi-cca!” chant as before).
There were many extraordinary exchanges between students as we
looked on. Our more passive roles and our plan were soon interrupted,
however, by a few students who decided they would like to direct their
questions to us, the researchers. Kevin was the first to suddenly break
with our instructions to interview a peer, turning to the three of us
(Kathleen, Philip, and Dominique):

Kevin (to Kathleen, Phil, and Dominique): Are you satisfied with the
research you did at Middleview and other places you’ve been to?

Kathleen to Kevin, (confirming): Is that for the researchers? (Kevin
nods).

Phil: Can you repeat the question?

Kevin: Are you satisfied with the research you did at Middleview, and
other places you’ve been to?

Kathleen: More than satisfied is my answer. It’s been bigger and more
interesting than I ever imagined when I dreamt up the project, so,
“satisfied,” for me, is not even an adequate word. I learned more . . .
I knew I would learn a lot, but I had no idea that it would be, uh, this
kind of experience: so complex, so interesting, so full of meaning . . .
amazing people, and also working with an incredible team.

Philip: Ditto.

Dominque: What she said.

Philip: I don’t have anything to add to that.

Kevin: (laughs) Ditto, ditto, ditto . . . Do I ask my next question?

Kathleen (nodding): Your 2nd question.

Kevin: Do you think we stayed on track with the research, or do you
think a lot of the time was wasted and we could have done more?

Philip: I will take that. To say, in every activity whether that’s teaching
or acting or living, there’s ‘wasted time’; we have this idea of wasted
time, and I think, in a creative project especially, you need wasted time:
you need time where things may not be working right or it’s not coming
together. My feeling is that if there was wasted time, the only time when
there was wasted time is, on my part, if I didn’t respond to what I was
seeing well enough, like maybe I didn’t pick up on some things and
maybe let other things go, but in terms of the class as a whole, what we
did? I don’t think any time was wasted. I think we did some really great
stuff, and, who knows? Maybe we needed it to be that way to do what
we did.
Kathleen: I'd just like to add another thing. Sometimes, it's hard for teachers (turns towards the Teacher and smiles) and other people when they really like a class or a group of students, it's sometimes hard to be a disciplinarian, and to point out the things that you would . . . You want everybody to be there every day; you want everyone to be on time. And you want everybody's input. But you don't always get that, and, in fact, you rarely get that in a class. Sometimes, as researchers, and as teachers I would say as well, your affection gets in the way a little bit and you are unable to structure it completely the way you'd like to.

Misha: Ok, I have a question for you guys (looks up to Kathleen, Phil, and Dominique). What is the . . . what was the best idea that you guys got from us so far?

Dominique: The best idea . . . They've all been really good ideas. I don't know that there's one that I can sort of say, “That's it, that's the best thing.” I think, um, what I particularly like about this class—and, maybe, it's the school in general—is the way that the plans that we have for you don't always work out according to our plan but what you do with it is way better than anything we could have come up with anyway, so, it's really good that way. The spontaneous discussions that we've had, the way you engage with the work that we give you, there's no way we could have planned or imagined that, so, I say that's what would be the best thing about this class, about this research.

Kathleen: One of the best things that has been confirmed for me, is that I think a lot of the current media depictions and a lot of government reform and policy is not supportive of youth. I think that's a fairly straight-forward observation to make. And when you're someone who doesn't see teenagers or youth or urban schools that way and you think that they're different, and better and richer, it's really affirming to come into a place and to be convinced again that you're right and they're wrong.

Philip: For me, I would say that the best idea I had was how to work dramatically . . . It's far easier to set up something, an activity where the students are able to demonstrate what they know actively rather than sitting in a circle and raising their hands, or writing a test, but rather, just being who they are in a real situation, you know? I'm thinking of the process drama that we did, and I saw such involvement and I saw such different characters, and some of them, yeah, were very much like the people that were embodying them, but some of them took very big risks and I think there was so much that was created in that moment that we wouldn't have gotten in any other way. So I think the best idea that I've gotten is the strength of working in drama . . . maybe specifically process drama.
Near the conclusion of the interview session, one more student, Alicia, decided that she would like to direct a question to us. That we had not anticipated their interest in questioning us is not surprising. So many times, in high school classrooms, adults beseech students to speak, to question; so often these invitations are met with silence. This was not the case on this day for the power was with them. They were the interviewers. They were feeding off each other and running with their own questions:

Alicia (Bi-racial [Afro-Caribbean and French Canadian], female): This is a question for an adult, so whoever wants to answer... Um, as a teenager, you must have felt lost and hoped that you’d find your way when you reached adulthood. But now that you’re an adult, do you feel as sure of yourself and the point of life?

Phil: I don’t think there’s much difference. But just one of the differences though, between high school life compared to my life now, is that I answer to myself. In high school, I’d get frustrated with how many people I’d have to answer to: my parents, the teachers, and blah, blah, blah. Now, I find it harder in a way, because I have high expectations for myself and when I don’t meet those expectations, it’s very hard to cope with that. If you let somebody else down, you can kind of go, “Oh, they’re a jerk!”, but if it’s you that you’re letting down, it’s kind of harder to live with and that gives you a feeling of being lost, because, well, you wonder, “Are my standards too high, or am I just not measuring up?”

Kathleen: I think I would say that when I was a teenager, I spent a lot of time... I liked being a teenager, but I also spent a lot of time thinking that I’d be this really different person when I was old and things would be just so. I’m really happy with my life but I realize now that the seeds of who I am were present then. So I didn’t morph into this different person, but who I was then—with all my insecurities, and worries and concerns—they’re still with me, except I feel that the ground beneath my feet is a little bit more solid.

CONCLUSIONS

In our view, this was a project about how to “work the hyphen,” as Fine (1994) describes it. What was the nature of the hyphen between us and them? How were our histories/presents bound together? Saying our research was for and with them does not get us off the ethical hook. So, what was the thread between us in this project since we were, decidedly, not interested in reproducing what Haraway (1988, see Fine 1994) describes as the “god trick”: depicting them from
nowhere while sheltering ourselves. We were, in fact, interested in making
possible, if we could, Spivak's (1988) notion of listening to the plural voices of
those normally Othered and hearing them as constructors, agents, and dissemi-
nators of knowledge.

Some reflections here on the apparent folly of (two White) university
researchers positioning themselves as co-researchers with a diverse roomful
of high school Drama students. We never lost sight of the power dynamics at
work in presenting ourselves in this way: Because of our elevated profes-
sional status and access to cultural capital (relative to the teacher and the stu-
dents) we had the luxury of conferring whatever title we wished on ourselves
and on our students. In other words, simply calling ourselves co-researchers
did not make it so. From several casual asides uttered by the students, we
were aware that their conception of a researcher was of someone who exper-
iments, uses trial and error; we were thought of as impartial observers,
appraisers, highly educated people conducting tests to generate data, with
the results and conclusions to be published in a scientific journal they would
never read. Given their preconceptions and our desire to establish a trusting
relationship with the class, it was a daunting task to i) genuinely collaborate
with them on this research, ii) explicate the subtleties of our critical ethnog-
graphic methodology, iii) overturn a built-in self-consciousness that obtains
whenever visitors from outside the classroom come to observe, and iv)
remain ever vigilant about our raced, classed, gendered translations of their
ideas. Fine's (1994) caveats about ethics, praxis, and qualitative research
rang in our ears: “Domination and distance get sanitized inside science. Por-
traits of disdain, pity, need, strength, or all of the above are delivered for pub-
ic consumption” (p.79).

We do not delude ourselves into thinking that we could ever fully disrupt the
power relations from which we gained our elevated status, nor was this our goal.
And certainly the framework within which our research was conducted would
never dissolve so completely that we could fail to notice that these students still
occupied their roles as students who were obligated to humor (even please?)
their important guests, “. . . researcher[s] doused quite evidently in status and
privilege as the Other sits domesticated” (Fine, 1994, p. 80). It has become a
special interest to us in our research, the reasons why stereotypes might have
such a powerful stranglehold on youth. So powerful, that our research can
sometimes fail to interrogate the ubiquity of these assigned social roles. We
thought, through laboring with them, that youth might—given the chance—
want to disprove existing theories about themselves. We learned that teenagers
both live by and have disdain for the pervasive codes of stereotyping prevalent
in high schools.
At the conclusion of Lesko’s (2001) study, she calls for a re-theorizing of adolescence, one in which, for instance, such contradictory notions of old and young, mature and immature, traditional and innovative are held simultaneously:

Rather than the assumption of cumulative and one-way development that is now in place in both science and popular culture, a recursive view of growth and change directs us to look at local contexts and specific actions of young people, without the inherent evaluation of steps, stages, and socialization (p.197).

In this new theoretical terrain, we are arguing for new methodological risks, where drama methods, like extended improvisations, act as recursive strategies that cause us (researchers) to productively lose our confidence in those common characteristics of youth. These common characteristics can fix us, often unwittingly, in developmental theories that mitigate against the co-construction of knowledge. *Theoria*, the form of knowledge that is called theory, comes from the same root as does the word “theatre” (Lyman & Scott, 1975). New theories become imaginable in the moment of dramatic improvisation, the moment when our latent, embodied, and experiential knowledge is called on, when our actions become the fodder for the creative responses of others, and when the quality of our communication depends on our ability to take others in.

Three years later, we have “stayed a long time,” but have only begun to scratch the surface of the social roles, narratives, and performances of youth identities in and beyond their drama roles. If Weis & Fine (2000) are right when they charge schools with maintaining and separating student identities along gender and race lines and further that schools, to their peril, stress the form of schooling rather than the substance of learning, we would like to bravely argue that drama research, which generates data from the very substance of learning, achieves the opposite. The fluid identity-play of dramatic improvisation as a research device offers a site for the critical interrogation of a context and what is learned there. We hope to have also demonstrated how drama might productively interrupt traditional hierarchical research arrangements, especially for those of us who spend our (research) days in schools with young people.

NOTES

\(^1\) All names of students and schools are pseudonyms.

\(^{**}\) “Process drama” is a general term used to describe a method of drama instruction in which, typically, the teacher and the whole class enter into an imaginary context, often based on source material gathered by the teacher or students. The goal is to investigate any of a number of possible themes through sustained improvisation, during which students and teacher might take on a variety of roles and relationships through various theatrical conventions.
In The Art and Politics of Qualitative Research: Creating Culture, Representing ‘Reality,’
Gallagher (2004) argues that research, like drama, is both a process and a product and that
improvisation—as the life-blood of drama activity—becomes a particularly apt metaphor for
understanding the conditional ways in which to work through the problematics of the
researcher-subject (and teacher-student) relationship.

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