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'In drama you can be anything ... ': student perspectives on drama teaching and school performance in Icelandic compulsory education

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to shed light on how students experience drama lessons and school performance when drama is part of the school curriculum. Within a sociocultural framework of understanding, an ethnographic study was conducted on the culture and context of drama implementation in two schools in Iceland. The students talk about drama being their favourite subject, and they believe that they are learning a lot. The students are affected through embodied learning, and the popularity and qualitative dimensions of perceived learning and perceived satisfaction of drama lessons and the teaching are documented at both schools.

KEYWORDS

Students experience in drama; drama education; school performance; drama teaching; drama curriculum

Introduction

Why teach drama? What is gained by teaching drama? What is it that drama has to offer that other disciplines do not offer? Anderson (2012) points out that drama sits in a unique place within the education system, at the intersection between intellectual, creative and embodied education. Furthermore, Anderson maintains that drama teaching is transformative, meaning that drama can support the academic, social and emotional growth of young people. As I have written elsewhere, I believe that through drama students develop their emotions through empathy and self-control. They build up their self-confidence and creativity and boost their powers of expression, as well as improving their social and co-operative skills. I also believe that the uniqueness of drama comprises, *inter alia*, its ability to harness, in equal measure, intellect, creation and physical endowments. Thus art, and then drama, is an agent of change, able to nourish the students' social and emotional development (Thorkelsdóttir 2016).

As this article focuses on how students experience drama lessons and school performance when drama is part of the school curriculum, I will give a short overview of the curriculum guide in compulsory education. The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide (2014) for compulsory education (ages 6-to 16-year-old students, grades 1–10) is based on six fundamental pillars. They are *literacy in the widest sense, education towards sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity*. All the fundamental pillars are based on critical thinking, reflection, scientific attitudes

and democratic values. Competence criteria for each subject are defined at the completion of Grades 4,7 and 10. Drama in the National Curriculum is a subject of its own, aiming at training students in the methods of art (such as improvisation, engagements, creating a character and interaction), but no less in dramatic literacy in the widest sense of the term; that is, enriching and facilitating the students' understanding of themselves, human nature and society (Thorkelsdóttir 2016).

In drama, students are to have the opportunity to place themselves in the position of others and experiment with different expression forms, behaviour and solutions in a secure school environment. This is all done through play, performance and creation (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2014). The competence criteria for drama grade 4 are process-based. The competence criteria are a mixture of content and of aims, and state the following:

The lesson needs to include: teachers in role (as part of cooperation with their peers and teachers, put together simple acts with a clear beginning, middle and end), living through drama (by placing themselves in the position of others in a dramatic process/role play and taking part in a conversation as a specific character), self-expression (such as memorising a short text and delivering it in a clear manner in front of an audience), growing through drama (such as being able to describe a performance on stage and/or in visual media with regard to plot, subject matter and characters of the work), working in pairs, and learning through drama (such as taking active part in a dramatic process in a group and showing consideration for their schoolmates). (The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2014)

In the competence criteria for drama grade 7 and 10, lessons in drama are theatre/performance based, and drama is more product oriented.

The lessons need to include: improvisation, the student's ability to take on a role, work with text, work in a group, work with many forms of theatre/performance, take on different acting styles and be able to see the connection between the performer and the audience. (The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2014)

The competence criteria build on each other from the elementary forms of drama in grade 4 to more complex dramatic activity at the end of grade 10.

Overview of the literature

This article draws on some of the literature concerning drama education both as a method and as a performance aspect. According to O'Toole and O'Mara (2007, 207), there are four 'paradigms of purpose' in using and teaching drama. They are: *cognitive/procedural*, which means gaining knowledge and skill in drama; *expressive/developmental*, which means growing through drama; *social/pedagogical*, which means learning through drama; and *functional/learning*, which means learning what people do in drama. In many texts about drama in education these purposes are interwoven. They also talk about three sets of dimensions in drama: *making* (playwright, improviser, director, designer), *presenting* (actor, technical crew), and *responding* (audience, dramaturge, critic) (213-214). O'Toole and Dunn (2015, 221) argue for teaching drama in every classroom, in the following way:

Drama is about exploring - discovering and creating- and about performing. Principally, especially in the primary years, it is about creating models - models of behaviour and

action that can be practised and performed safely / ... / in any human context, within or beyond the children's real experience, all over the world and through history.

For the purpose of this article, I want to emphasise some of the familiar aspects of Drama in Education, for example *process drama* where both the students and teacher are working in and out of role, starting from a pretext. A pretext can be a headline in a newspaper, a story, an object, and more. O'Neill (1995) describes process drama as being used to explore a problem, situation, theme or a series of related ideas or themes through the use of the artistic medium of unscripted drama. According to O'Neill and Lambert (1982), *Drama in education* (DiE) is a mode of learning. Through the students' active identification with imagined roles and situations in drama, they can learn to explore issues, events and relationships (O'Neill and Lambert 1982, 10–11). When drama refers to the subject in the curriculum, it is likely to embrace all sorts of activities such as warm-up exercises, improvisations, watching plays and rehearsing plays, games and other related activities (Fleming 2011). Thorkelsdóttir (2012), in an Icelandic context, suggests that whether the teacher is working as a teacher in a role for the benefit of the process, or leading the students working on a text on acting style or improvisations for the benefit of a product, both teacher and students are working together on how to express and enrich their feelings and they seek to understand and recognise the relationship between culture and values. Lazarus (2015) believes that for young people, performance can be an opportunity to be someone else and young people use this opportunity to explore, practise, experiment with and extend their awareness of self and the world around them. Hence drama/theatre education can provide young people with myriad benefits and can positively contribute to student success (Lazarus 2015). In this overview of the literature, both drama as a process and product is important in education. Drama cannot be fully used as a method without it being rooted in the theatre. The students can take on a role and work in that role through improvisation with other students on issues relevant in society and maybe crucial to the students. The learning process contains the performing aspect.

Theoretical background

The rationale for the study is that drama was included in the national curriculum framework in Iceland for the first time in 2013. As a result, there were considerable tensions as to whether Icelandic schools could or should embrace this newcomer to the curriculum, whether the necessary competence existed to teach the subject and what kind of status drama could achieve among the other subjects in school. When a new national curriculum guide for drama is created, what kind of support is needed from the education system in order to make this work? Those points are examples of myriads of questions that must be asked when a new subject is made obligatory at the same time as fundamental changes are presented in the national curriculum. This article aims to answer the following question: *How do students speak about their experience of drama lessons and school performance when drama is part of their education?*

In this article both practice architectures by Kemmis (2014), and Goodlad's (1979), curriculum theory are used to interpret the findings. The concept 'practice architectures' refers to the specific cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements found in or brought to a site (Kemmis 2014). Kemmis (2014) explain practice as

organised bundles of sayings, doings and relatings that hang together in the project of practice. This is about what is considered appropriate to say or do in a particular practice, and what kinds of relations between people within the practice are necessary and proper according to the culture of that practice (see a more detailed description of practice architecture in Thorkelsdóttir 2020). Curriculum theory, as described by Goodlad, focuses on curriculum thinking at different levels of implementation of the curriculum in school, and this is useful for understanding the complexity connected to drama teaching and learning. Goodlad (1979) has defined five curricular levels to consider in planning, and in research. The five levels are: the *Ideological curriculum* that emerges from idealistic planning processes as constructed by scholars and teachers. A curriculum of ideas is intended to reflect funded knowledge. *Formal curricula* are those that gain officially approved status by state and local school boards and are adopted by an institution or teachers. The formal curriculum is the sanctioned curriculum that represents the interests of the community. The *perceived curriculum* is the curriculum of the mind. It reflects on what teachers, parents, and others believe the curriculum to be. Teachers are the most influential when thinking of the perceived curriculum. The *operational curriculum* is what goes on hour after hour in schools and classrooms. The final level, and the most crucial one, is the *experiential curriculum*. The experiential curriculum is what the students actually experience in their learning environments (Goodlad 1979, 58–64). In this article the *experienced* curriculum is analysed from the perspective of the students, based on interviews and performance analyses.

Methodology

In this study a qualitative approach has been chosen to shed light on students' interaction with the teacher, with one another, and with the tasks in the drama class, during their phase in the field over one school year. Within a socio-cultural framework of understanding, a micro ethnographic study of the culture and the context for the implementation of drama was carried out. A micro-ethnographic approach focuses on language or discourse-in-use (the drama discourse), as Baker, Green, and Skukauskaitė (2008, 79) maintain. The ethnographer adopts a cultural lens to interpret observed behaviour, ensuring that the behaviours are placed in a culturally relevant and meaningful context (Fetterman 2010).

The study was carried out in two schools, Hillcrest school and Mountain-line school, both located in the capital area, during the school year 2013-2014. As drama only became part of the curriculum in 2013, the choice of schools was determined by pragmatic reasons. This meant that the classrooms and teachers chosen had to fulfil certain criteria, like teacher competence in drama and the school had to have drama on their timetable. In Hillcrest school the lessons in drama were carried out each week during the school year (28 weeks), each lesson lasting 80 min. The group I observed has 32 students in one class. The groups consisted of 17 girls and 15 boys (10-11 years old). The students are in 5th grade and have been together as a group for one year. In Mountain-line school, 32 weeks were used for teaching drama, and the group had drama lessons each week, lasting 80 min. The class that I observed in drama has 25 students and contains both genders: 10 girls and 15 boys. They are in 6th grade (11-12 years old) and have been together as a group for two years.

The material was gathered over one school year in both schools, through observations, field notes, video recordings, through conversations and interviews with the students. The ethnographic account is formed as a thick description. The analysis is qualitative. Based on the observation of the performances, combined with an analysis of a video recording from the performances, a thick description was written of the peak event in the school year in drama: the performance with an audience. A thick description is a method by which to present examples from data by giving detailed accounts of field experiences in which the researcher presents patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context (Holloway 1997). A thick description is a detailed written record of cultural interpretation and can contain in-depth data (Denzin 1989).

The analytic approach is guided by some principles of field studies. The idea of multi-layered interpretations is applied. I first describe what I see, hear and sense. After that, I identify the themes of importance and reflect upon them. Finally, I take a *meta* perspective, focusing on the large picture, on the practice, using the lens of a practice theory called the theory of practice architectures. These together form three layers of interpretation (Fangen 2005). Giving a holistic portrait forces the researcher to see beyond events in a classroom.

A description of how the students express their engagement were made, *their impressions, their joy, and their performing skills* during the whole theatrical event: before, during and after the performance. Through an analysis of the interviews with the students, I wanted to understand more of the experienced drama curriculum. I have constructed two themes that guide the analysis: *perceived learning* and *perceived satisfaction*. The focus of my interest has been to elicit what students think they learn in drama lessons (perceived learning), and how they appreciate (and evaluate) the drama lessons (perceived satisfaction). In the interview excerpts, the students' expressions of appreciation of drama and of their learning in drama are intertwined. At the end I sum up the description of the practices and the practitioner from the viewpoint of observations.

The students' expressions of experiences in the performance, from the observer's perspective

I will now present findings of students' experiences in performing the play *Ronia the Robber's daughter* by Astrid Lindgren. I have made thick descriptions with headings, short narrative constructions, indicating notable aspects of the students' experiences when they are performing. The thick descriptions are from observer's field notes and video transcriptions. These aspects are formed like short narrative constructions. The first presentation is the performance in Hillcrest school, and after that the performance in Mountain-line school. Subsequently detailed descriptions are compiled regarding the performance of the play from the observer's perspective. It was a coincidence that both schools worked with the story of *Ronia the Robber's daughter* during the school year – Hillcrest school only for a few weeks and Mountain-line school for the whole school year. The performance in Hillcrest school took place in the school's cafeteria and the performance in Mountain-line school took place in the forest.

Short summary of the fantasy story about Ronia the robber's daughter by Astrid Lindgren

The following paragraphs is a short summary of the story in the performances. It is a fantasy story about Ronia, the robber's daughter, who was born when a thunderstorm raged over the mountain, splitting her father's fortress into two parts. Her father Matthías (Mattis) and her mother Lovísa (Lovis) are living on one side of the fortress with their clan of robbers, including Skalla Pétur (Skalle-Per). One day, Ronia meets Birkir (Birk), the son of Borki, her father's arch enemy. Birkir's family, Borki and Valdís (Undis), and their clan of robbers have to live on the other side of Matthías' fortress with the so-called hell gap separating the two fortresses. Ronia and Birkir become friends when Birkir almost falls down the hell gap by jumping back and forth, and Ronia saves him. One day, Birkir is captured by Ronia's father, Matthías. Ronia then decides to go over to Borki's side in order to save her friend Birkir. Her father, Matthias, disowns her for doing so. As a result, Ronia and Birkir run away into the forest, where they live in a cave and experience adventures, and meet creatures like elves and hobgoblins. In the end, both families are reunited and both Matthías' and Borki's clans of robbers are united into one family. The story of Ronia is a story of friendship and courage, but first and foremost a story of love.

The performance in Hillcrest School

Everything is ready for the play one sunny day in March. Today is the day the students in the 5th grade are going to perform 'Ronia the Robber's Daughter'. The whole cast includes 46 students. The stage is ready, set up in the cafeteria, and the students have been rehearsing during the previous days.

There is excitement in the air and the students are trying to be quiet. Some of the students are already in character and are making grimaces according to their roles.

The audience consists of around 50 students from the school from first to 4th grades, and they wait patiently for the play to start.

Performance skills

When the lights are turned down a baby's scream can be heard, and the light goes on behind the white sheet frame in the middle of the stage.

A shadow figure is giving birth, with - so it seems - witches dancing around in the back. Suddenly, all is dark and Lovísa comes on stage with a baby in her arms. The scene plays out with Lovísa singing the song of Lovísa with help from a choir that most of the students are in when they are not on stage.

Then suddenly Ronia and all the actors appear on the stage and sing the song, Ronia the Robber's Daughter. The audience knows that song, and they are singing with the actors.

When the song is over Skalla-Pétur walks slowly over to Ronia. He has a walking stick in hand and he speaks in a low voice, almost incomprehensible. It takes him some time to walk to Ronia, and when he finally reaches her, Ronia asks him to speak up. The audience laughs, and when Skalla-Pétur slowly walks off the stage, all attention is on him.

The transformation to the hell gap scene was smooth; all the actors left the stage, leaving Ronia and Birkir alone by the hell gap.

When Ronia and Birkir are finally alone, they start to become friends. Their characters look at each other and they smile a little bit and then hurry to look right back down at their own feet, almost as if they were shy of each other. Then all the robbers from both sides burst onto the stage and capture Birkir. All the actors on stage start to fight in slow motion in a scene that lasts for a few minutes.

When the fight scene is over everybody sings the farting song with appropriate bottom movements. The actors look as if they are enjoying themselves. They are laughing and smiling and some making more exaggerated movements than others. All the actors were fully engaged; they were all creating a character and they were all interacting with one another.

Solidarity and ownership

The students playing Ronia and Birkir were deeply engaged in their roles in the performance:

When Ronia gets stuck in a hole in the forest, she calls out, 'help, help', and it looks as if her leg is really stuck and hurting badly. She tries to pull her leg with both hands, with a facial expression of being hurt and afraid. When Birkir jumps on to the stage, he calls out her name and looks at his friend. He looks alarmed and starts to pull her leg to save her. The two actors seem to take this very seriously and are really engaged in the scene, which has a shade of darkness in it. After this episode they warmly embrace, smiling broadly.

Relief and joy

In the final scene everybody in the whole cast is on stage.

Both families have decided to become friends. The whole cast makes a straight line over the entire stage and sings the song Ronia the Robber's Daughter again. After that, they all take a bow again, and again they are laughing and giggling with joy while the audience applauds them.

This performance lasted 30 min, and when it was over all the actors gathered in the drama class/music classroom. The students were smiling and talking really loud. The actors did not get a long break, because the next show for the rest of the school (grades six to ten) was about to begin.

Themes connected to experiences in acting visible in the hillcrest performance

Based on the analysis in the thick descriptions with the aspects (headings) as initial base-lines, a more developed theme was created, focusing on the analysis of experiences that seem to be expressed. The themes are shown in [Table 1](#).

As shown in [Table 1](#), the themes from observation of the students' renderings of the performances in Hillcrest school are (1) Performance skills, which include bodily engagement, (2) Excitement and joy and (3) Solidarity and ownership of the play. These themes are, on the one hand, connected with developing performance skills, and, on the other, they have to do with the development of community, as is shown in solidarity and ownership, as well as in excitement and joy. All the actors

Table 1. Themes in the students' expressions of experiences during the performance at Hillcrest.

Aspect	Theme
The seriousness of play shown in stage fight and ninja moves in slow motion	Performance skills
Stage performance according to the instruction	
The beginning friendship made visible with smiles, shyness and laughter	
Engagement shown in the characters of Ronia and Birki	
Parodic element forms reinforcing feedback loops between audience and actors	Excitement and joy
Audience and actors sing and dance, smiling along	
Students giggling with joy when receiving applause, and praise from the teachers	
Before the performance, excitement and focus on costumes and makeup	Solidarity and ownership
The enactment on stage is thrilling and theatrical	

seemed to give their best to make the performance as joyful as it turned out to be. When working with 46 students, and only a part of them on stage at one time, the students had to be fully engaged in the play. Their excitement is reflected in the students' acting. They could not wait to get on stage, but at the same time they did not make any noise while waiting backstage. Here, there is no question of discipline as the students are engaged in something meaningful and they all have set roles and have an opportunity to shine in different roles. The character building and the bodily engagement were visible in every student who took part.

The performance in mountain-line school

The sky is covered with dark clouds and it has been raining throughout the night and during the morning. It is still raining and the forest, the school outdoor recreation area, where the performance takes place, is wet. A narrow path curls upward like a snake towards the forest. The cast of the play is from two classes in grade 6, a total of 50 excited young people. They are going to perform the play that they have worked so hard on over the whole school year.

Performance skills

The first scene is the birth of Ronia, which takes place in an open area with a few trees around it. Eight students take part in this opening scene: Ronia's parents, Lovísa and Matthías, Ronia, and five hobgoblins. The storyteller (the teacher) had already met with the audience - consisting of lower secondary students from the school - a little further down the road and had already begun to tell the audience the story of Ronia's birth. The audience wanders from station to station, where the actors come alive from a frozen position. Suddenly, Lovísa, Matthías and Ronia burst from the trees and start to talk about Ronia needing to be careful in the forest. The character Lovísa is clear and articulated, and her worries about her daughter Ronia seem to be sincere. The character Matthías behaves in, as I see it, an exaggerated way (as if he is in fact addressing the audience and not Ronia). His face shows expressions of being worried about Ronia when he is telling her about the dangers of the forest. Every time Ronia tells him 'I know', he changes his expression to surprise. The audience is laughing, and with each line he raises his voice a little bit and gets funnier and funnier.

'Breaking character' unintentionally

It seems as though Matthías' co-actors have a hard time not laughing along with the audience, but they manage to get through the scene. When the scene ends, the audience claps very loudly for a long time. The actors all stand still with big smiles on their faces, looking at each other as if they do not know what to do.

'Breaking character' intentionally

As the audience walks slowly away from the actors, they all start to laugh out loud in nervousness. The girl that plays Lovísa tells them to be quiet by whispering 'sch-sch' to them and placing her finger on her mouth and pointing to the audience. The actors become quiet. The girl who plays Lovísa takes her role seriously and never steps out of character; by doing so, she influences the other students to follow her example. The audience is being cautious because the road is still wet and because they are approaching the hell gap, where Ronia meets Birkir for the first time. The boy who is playing Birkir must improvise a part of his scene. He tells the audience: Please, you need to give me more space, as you can see this gap is both deep and wide, and I need to be able to jump over this horrible 'hell gap.' He slowly convinces himself to jump, by talking out loud to himself, and when he finally jumps, the entire audience claps and whistles. When Ronia jumps, the audience does the same again. The scene is short, but it is important for the play, as we now see Birkir for the first time and because the scene shows risk and competition that turns into friendship. Suddenly, knights come running from the forest and the knights' leader asks the audience if they have seen any robbers. Some of the audience members respond and say, 'Yes, they all ran this way,' pointing in the wrong direction. The leader of the knights must improvise his scene, as he does not know what the audience is going to tell him. The knights run together with their wooden swords raised in fighting position.

Solidarity and ownership

When entering the middle space of the forest, Ronia comes running down the hill; she is in a hurry as if someone is chasing her, and then suddenly she is trapped: her leg is stuck in a hole, and in that hole we see elves. The character Ronia acts with frustration; she keeps yelling and calling for help. She tries to pull her leg out from the hole but fails to do so. She is weeping and about to give up. The elves are hanging on to her leg and refuse to let go. The elves are little pink creatures that ask repeatedly 'What is this? What is this?' Then, all of the sudden, Birkir comes running out from the forest to help Ronia. Birkir pulls and pulls on Ronia's leg as he comforts her, saying, 'It will be fine; we will do this together.' They manage to escape, only to meet Matthías and Borka - robbers engaged in a fight. Borki and Valdís are the parents of Birkir, and we see them for the first time. All of the students take part in the scene and everybody is fighting with swords and sticks. Everybody is smiling and laughing, and the actors use their bodies as if they have been trained as knights. When Valdís calls out that the knights are coming, no one can hear it, so she has to repeat her warning a few times, and then everybody hides. Again, the knights ask the audience if they know where the robbers

are, and again the audience members point in the wrong direction. When the danger has passed, all of the robbers come together and they decide to make peace with one another and join forces. In the end, all the students sing the final song, 'Ronja the Robber's Daughter' together and take a bow.

Relief and joy

The performance lasted for 50 min. After the performance, the response from the audience was positive. Everybody was saying 'Good job,' and praising the students for a job well done. There were a lot of smiling faces and the students were saying, 'I'm glad this is over.' The teacher was pleased and told the students that this was the best performance he had ever seen or had taken part in. After the performance, the students had a little break. They all had to give their costumes to one of the teachers and head back to the school in the bus for a lunch break. After the lunch break, the younger students of the school came to see the play.

Themes connected to experiences in acting visible in the mountain-line performance

The themes constructed based on the analysis of aspects in the thick description of the students' renderings in the Mountain-line performance are performance skills, 'breaking character' intentionally, 'breaking character' unintentionally, solidarity and ownership, and relief and joy. In the expressions observed in the Mountain-line performance, I could add a few more characteristic features to the theme of performance skills, including strong improvisation and engagement, character building, and interaction. These three features can be summed up as a theme involving theatre skills, which will be reviewed further as one of the themes discussed. The theme 'breaking character' intentionally describes a role behaviour where the character addresses the audience directly. This can be considered an acting skill. The theme 'breaking character' unintentionally points to the beginner's weak skills in sustaining a role, or maybe to an unbearable tension in performing for an audience as shown in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Themes in the students' expressions of experiences during the performance at Mountain-line.

Aspect	Theme
Performing with a teacher-storyteller and great concentration from the actor group The actors come alive from being frozen. The knight roles performed with great engagement and improvisation skills. The character work of Lovisa was clear and articulated; that of Matthías was somewhat exaggerated. The scenery was impressive; there was strong improvisation and engagement. Ronja was convincing in expressing affection and Birkir was also a comforting helper. Stage fighting made the audience laugh. After a sudden change, peace is restored.	Performance skills
Birkir addressing the audience Knight leader addressing the audience	'Breaking character,' intentionally
The robber characters are trying to suppress laughter when they sing the farting song.	'Breaking character,' unintentionally
Co-actors are having a hard time not laughing with the audience. Breaking out of fiction with laughter	Solidarity and ownership
Before the performance, the students worry about their costumes becoming wet. After the performance, the students show signs of relief as well as excitement.	Relief and joy

All the students took part in creating a play that they performed in, and the audience responded to it. The audience played an important role in the play, as a portion of it was improvised. The whole ensemble cast worked as one, with all the scenes being of equal importance to the story.

Performance for audience as a learning event and arts education practice

The themes constructed are based on the initial coding of the aspects partly overlap. Some of the themes point explicitly to the learning and expressed theatrical knowledge during the event. The learning seems to be fuelled through the more phenomenological aspects of experience like bodily engagement, excitement, joy and solidarity.

Performance skills

Character building as part of performance skills was notable in both schools as one basic skill in drama competence is to create a role. To sustain a role is also a basic skill. This character-building skill is usually not strong in the early stages of working with drama. The skill to interact and to improvise based on a theme are both aspects that may promote creativity and further develop performance skills. To maintain a double focus on communication with the other actors as well as with the audience is also considered to be another aspect of performance skills.

Bodily engagement is also considered a part of performing skills. The symbolic language of theatre is most often articulated as an embodied expression. Based on the thick descriptions, the physical aspects of acting seem to be at a level that the students were, for the most part, able to respond to; for example, being in the 'freeze' position, doing stage fighting, jumping down from a tree, jumping over an imaginary gap and exaggerating some parody elements like in the farting song. Bodily engagement is also expressed as emotional engagement in some of the characters, such as in the case of Lovísa, Ronia and Birkir. Young students seem to feel at ease when engaging bodily in playful ways.

Solidarity and ownership are created through learning to work together and through developing a sense of timing that promotes a feeling of community within the group. This was shown in many ways, starting from the students' anxiety among Mountain-line students regarding whether or not it might rain out in the forest on the day of the performance. The respect shown by keeping silent when not on the stage is another sign of solidarity. The contributions of adding extra characters and the students accepting the sharing of the role of Ronia with one another is also a sign of solidarity and is indicative of how the students took ownership of the performance.

Challenging the audience by 'breaking character,'

The Mountain-line school performance is carried out based on exterior stations and with a walking audience. There is actually no line to include a fourth wall and it is a challenge for the students to decide when they are in character and when they are not. For young actors to stay in character and not to break out of the fiction as part of the performance

requires extensive training in improvisation and communication skills as part of their performing skills. When the character of Birkir asks the audience to move because he has a horrible 'hell gap' to jump over, he is in character, but is addressing the audience directly. Simultaneously, he is sustaining the illusion that is necessary for the play. The same can be said about the scene with the leader of the knights. He 'breaks character' slightly by asking the audience a question. They are 'breaking out of the fiction,' adding a layer in the montage of the fiction, and at the same time they are creating feedback loops between the audience and themselves.

On the other hand, stress can affect young actors to such an extent that they break out of character, especially when the spectators are of a young age, as they were at the Mountain-line school performance.

Excitement and joy

The excitement before and during the play was very notable in both groups. The joy during the performance was exhibited through an overflow of energy, and the breaking out of laughter during some moments when the audience laughed. The joy was very present in the singing as well, especially when both the actors and the audience sang together. This was also the case after the performance, when the students received applause and praise from the audience, and from the teachers. This joy can be traced to a feeling of accomplishing a task together, which in turn promotes a spirit of community.

Through the analyses of the two performances focusing on the expressions of the students' experiences, I have been able to grasp some aspects of what is going on regarding the students' experiences during the performances. Despite the fact that one of the groups had worked on the performance during the whole school year and the other group only for a few weeks, the experiences seemed to be quite similar to one another, both as learning events and as arts education practices. So far, the emphasis has been on what the students might experience during their drama lessons and in the performance. In the next section, I shall elaborate on the findings connected with the stories of the students and how they speak and reflect on the drama lessons.

Student voices on their experiences in drama lessons

I will now present my analyses of interviews and informal conversations from the fieldwork with the students, with a focus on perceived learning and perceived satisfaction with the drama class activities. To interpret perceived learning, we focus on what the students say about what they do and what they learn in the drama lessons. To draw out their perceived satisfaction with the drama class activities, the focus is on how the students evaluate drama as a subject in the experienced curriculum, and what they think are the characteristics of a good drama teacher. In this analysis, the students at Hillcrest and at Mountain-line are treated as one group, because no significant differences were detected in their views on what they learn and how they perceive, appreciate and evaluate drama. In the interview excerpts, the students' expressions of appreciation of drama and of their learning in drama are intertwined.

Perceived learning of drama lessons

At the beginning of fall semester, the students had formed some ideas about what it entailed to learn drama. A minority of the students could describe what a dramatic process was; however, many of them could see what they could gain by learning drama. One girl could explain what a dramatic process is:

I think a dramatic process is taking part in something with your classmates. You have to respect what they are doing and you have to listen. I have done some acting outside of school and I have learned that when you are watching a play or scene in the classroom you have to be silent and avoid saying something bad about what they did. Drama is about helping us to overcome shyness and we have to be able to place ourselves in the position of others. [I really like the drama classes.] (Interview Mountain-line school).

The girl had done some acting outside school and she had learned that when she is watching a play or scene in the classroom, she must be silent and avoid saying anything bad about what the other person did. She also learned that when taking part in a play in drama class, the students must work together. Some of the students have been to the theatre and most of them like movies. They say that the purpose of the drama class is to have fun playing and you learn how to act and to play games and make up stories. Some of the students could see that they learn communication and exercise respect for others in drama. Another girl from Hillcrest school said that through drama, one learns communication and collaboration and that she gets to take part in something with her classmates. 'And you have to respect what they are doing and you have to listen to them'. One of the boys said he could place himself in the position of others in a dramatic process:

Yes, I can, if somebody is behaving well, then I behave well, but it is also doing as the teacher asks me to do. (Interview Mountain-line school).

Another girl in the Mountain-line school knew that through drama, you learn communication and collaboration. 'Drama is about helping us to overcome shyness, and we have to be able to put ourselves in the position of others'. Some students saw that drama offered opportunities to learn how to act, play games and make up stories. One boy at Hillcrest school talked about why he liked being in drama: 'Because in drama we make a play and do some games together and the main purpose of drama is to teach children' (Interview Hillcrest school). Another one said that the purpose of drama was to have fun playing: '... and you learn how to act and to play games and make stories' (Interview Mountain-line school).

Perceived learning during the spring term

The students' learning can be marked by 'before' and 'after' the play. In a group interview, some of the boys still talked about how much they liked playing games for their own sake, not in the context of drama. Both the girls and the boys said drama was about playing and doing different exercises:

[What we like most about drama are the games, especially the zombie game. We also like to draw and play instruments. However, we also like] to do still images if we have to name something that we do in drama. (Interview Hillcrest school group, boys)

You can be funny, and you learn a lot. (Interview Mountain-line school, group interview)

To learn to listen to each other and to play out a story

In a group interview at the end of the fall semester, all the boys still agreed that the games and creating still images were the most fun activities in drama lessons. However, in a second interview at the end of the school year with boys at Hillcrest school, the students had performed the play and then they all talked about it and how much they liked doing plays together:

We like doing plays together. We know what we like to do, and we do listen to one another. Although sometimes we do not listen, we are creating a story from the beginning with a middle and an end. We have done a play, where we have done acting and sometimes the teacher would read a story to us and we had to act it out, I don't know what that is called. (Interview Hillcrest school, boys)

The importance of learning to stand up for our ideas, to speak, and to improvise. The girls think drama is important, because in drama they learn to speak and say what they mean and they do not have to hide themselves:

In drama we learn to improvise and to stand up for our ideas and we are training our minds and our ability to cooperate. We learn to speak and to say what we mean. Today, I have the courage to say what I mean. (Interview Mountain-line school)

The girls suggest that in drama they learn to improvise and to stand up for their ideas and that they are training their minds and improving their ability to cooperate.

To learn to create a character

The students feel that for the play to happen, 'you need to have music and you need to turn the lights out, but you also need to be quiet,' one of the boys says.

We have taken part in a play, so we know how it works. In the play, we had to make a character. It is the best class and we are learning to act and stuff like that. We know what drama is about because we have taken part in the play. We know what happens in a play, we know the story line, and how to make a character and how to change costumes in five minutes. We think we should have drama three times a week. (Interview Hillcrest school, girls)

The girls also talk about drama as a favourite subject:

Drama is one of my favourite subjects, because in drama we have done the show and we know what the play is about and we can follow the plot in a play. We know how to improvise and we know how to perform. (Interview Mountain-line school)

Later, the students tell me that when they are acting in front of an audience, the best way is to pretend that nobody is watching them. The students do a lot of plays in the hallway and they usually listen to what the others have to say: 'Unless it is crap, then they don't listen'. (Interview Mountain-line school, boys).

To learn to work with everybody even if you do not want to

The boys learn to work together and to speak aloud:

In drama, you may not turn your back on the audience and you have to speak out loud and you have to work with everybody, even if you don't want to. (Interview Mountain-line school, boys)

Perceived satisfaction with the drama class and the teaching

I will now turn to perceived satisfaction with the drama class and the teaching. The analysis is based on interviews and conversations with students. In the interviews, as well as in the conversations, the questions revolved around learning in the drama class, but as a spin-off from the interviews, the young students wanted to tell me about how much they appreciated drama class. There were no negative comments given at all. This was consistent throughout the autumn as well as in spring interviews and conversations.

Drama is fun

In the interviews, the overwhelming feeling that the students displayed was that they appreciated drama and it was a subject they had fun in.

I really like the drama classes. (Interview Mountain-line school, girl)

I like being in drama, because in drama we make a play and do some games together and the main purpose of drama is to teach children. (Interview Hillcrest school, boy)

Having fun while they learn seems to be a quality that the students appreciate. To have fun could perhaps be interpreted as the meaningfulness of being creative together with other students. To experience joy in the learning situation can be considered an important aspect of learning in drama. The students were pleased with drama as they were able to affect what was taught and did not have to sit still all the time. The girls talked about drama as a favourite subject: 'Drama is one of my favourite subjects' (Interview Mountain-line school, girls). And so did the boys: 'It is the best class. We think we should have drama three times a week' (Interview Mountain-line school, boys). In a group interview at Mountain-line school, the students told me that drama is great, fun, exciting, and awesome; that it is the best time they have at school.

According to the boys at Mountain-line, drama is one of their favourite subjects:

Because in drama you can be yourself and you don't have to sit the whole time and you can affect what is taught. (Interview Mountain-line school, boys)

In the boys' repertoire of vocabulary associated with drama, the direct and positive statements stand out, perhaps indicating a wish for more of this in other subjects as well. They appreciate that they can influence the teaching; they can move during the lesson and can be themselves. The overall picture from all the interviews pointed in the same direction: that drama is fun and appreciated.

Summarising the perceived satisfaction

The perceived satisfaction with the drama class can be summed up as central elements in all learning: to allow the students to be there in body and mind, as well as allowing them to express feelings, contributes to a positive climate for learning.

Interpretation of the students' experiences of perceived learning and perceived satisfaction in the drama class

I will now interpret and discuss the themes I have found in the students' experiences with drama. The themes constructed, based on the observation of student expressions during

the performance, comprise a perspective derived from observations made during the fieldwork, but from outside the researcher's interpretations. The themes are: performance skills (character building and bodily engagement), challenging the audience by 'breaking out of fiction', and excitement and joy. The theme-based analysis of the students' perceived learning and perceived satisfaction adds a perspective from inside the group; that is, the students' stories.

Perceived learning

Within the theme of perceived learning, two learning dimensions could be identified: 1) connected to drama/theatre and 2) performance skills. The learning dimension connected to drama/ theatre and performance skills is experienced in elaborate ways, when considering the young age in general of the students and the short time that they have been learning drama. In creating a play/theatre, the students speak about learning appropriate manners at a performance. They learn to act (*functional/learning*) (O'Toole and O'Mara 2007), to develop a character, to improvise, to take part in a dramatic process through games and stories, and by taking part in a performance they learn about costumes, props, lights, and music. Through physical presence and response, students become recipients of their own work (Fleming 2011, 21), meaning that students take part in the drama both as audience and as actors they can look at their own work almost from an outside perspective (*expressive/developmental*) (O'Toole and O'Mara 2007). They create still images, and they make believe. Through improvisation, collaboration and trust in each other in the classroom, the students gained performing skills, which they then made use of to perform in front of an audience. The learning in the classroom and the performance of the play met the competence criteria for the subject, as the students took an active part in a dramatic process in a group and showed consideration towards their schoolmates. They were also able to take up a character role in a suitable manner in front of an audience. They used props, costumes, sets and techniques to support their creation. The activity in the drama class, the students' enjoyment of drama and of making a play can all be linked to the experience that the students are gaining. The students note that they have learned to respect each other through cooperation and communication. The findings displaying perceived learning can be summed up in an interpretation; that the students become aware of what they do in drama and understand what they learn in drama. The fact that they repeatedly mention that they are learning to be quiet might mean that the school culture now has a strong desire to change. There is the aspect of self-control and respect that might contribute to a more complex understanding of learning to be quiet. It is, however, a notable paradox in the drama class that the students feel they both learn to be quiet and learn to stand up and voice their ideas.

Perceived satisfaction

The analysis of the theme 'perceived satisfaction' was summarised by recognising that the students mention central elements in learning; the students recognise being there in both body and mind and they have an impact on the teaching. This contributes to a positive climate for learning, where the role of the teacher is decisive. The students talk about

drama being their favourite subject, and they believe they are learning a lot. The students are affected through embodied learning, and the popularity and qualitative dimensions of perceived learning are documented at both schools. Taking into account the age of the students and their relatively scarce experience of drama, the competency of the students in describing their learning and their overall experiences in drama can be considered relevant and very clear. One student formulated it in this way: 'In drama you can be anything, we can play king and if we then want to play a footballer then we can do that.'

Conclusion

This article has focused on the key findings that emerge from the ethnographic data relating to the research questions: *How do students speak about their experience of drama lessons and school performance when drama is part of their education?* The focus is on the students' experiences in the drama class, through interviews and observation of the performance, to understand more of the experienced drama curriculum. The experiential curriculum is what the students actually experience, what they have 'learned' in the classroom (Goodlad 1979, 63–64). In the beginning the question about why teach drama was raised? What is it that drama has to offer that other disciplines do not offer? In short: How does drama educate? The answer is that drama education is collective. The students in both schools work in groups and they have the responsibility and possibility to influence the process and the product created as when adding a character in the play or choosing what game to play. In an ideal drama lesson the discipline is kept up by the participants through their negotiations and contributions. The combination of sensory, cognitive and affective knowing makes drama special, and potentially provides aesthetic knowledge. This potential is connected to embodied learning, which can be a very promising and interesting thought. The embodied learning was connected to sensory and cognitive learning through games and drama activity in the rehearsing of the play, leading to the performance of the play. In the Icelandic project, the performing aspects were strong motivational factors, and the focus on training, especially improvisational skills as preparation for the performance, turns the more existentially important aspects of drama into side products. Nevertheless, these aspects are there: as in the community feeling, the solidarity, being able to cooperate, and having the courage to stand up for one's own ideas.

In drama teaching practises the focus is on *making, presenting and responding* (O'Toole and O'Mara 2007). Through physical presence and response, both as actors and spectators, they learn to be percipients of their own work. *Making* in drama can cover short, improvised scenes, as well as rehearsing and developing plays. *Presenting* is the communication to an audience (for instance, the other students in the group). *Responding* can be to respond to a given task or to a theatrical performance. Through the making, presenting and responding, drama teaching practice aims at giving value to the experience the students will bring to the drama class in communication with society and its culture, as was done in both schools. The students gradually gain an increased understanding of the importance of form, the need for structure and the use of signs and symbols in drama. By taking part in the play, the students in both schools gained performance skills, like improvisation, engagement, creating a character and interaction. Drama in the Icelandic national curriculum is placed within the key learning area of the arts. In this study, the

students learn about art by taking part in it. Drama, as an arts subject, fits well into the definitions of arts education practice. The implementation, which is still ongoing, as not many schools in Iceland include drama in their curriculum, relies on the sound education of drama teachers, their involvement and interest. But first and foremost, it is incumbent upon policy makers, the government and the school authorities to give drama space, respect, time and room for the educational purposes of all students in compulsory education. Connecting back to the fact that the students clearly articulated learning and enjoyment in drama classes, school leaders could listen and respond to student voices by promoting and supporting drama classrooms and drama teachers.

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Notes on contributor

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