

Roles as a route to being 'Other': drama-based interventions with at risk students

Abstract

Four drama programmes for at risk youth run by a community theatre formed the basis for a nine month participant observation and interview study. This paper focuses on the concept of roles, using this as a lens to explore participants' experiences, and to suggest ways in which taking part in the programmes enabled young people to 'be Other' in their lives outside the drama space. We consider: the unwanted role; role-playing through previous experiences; role as a protective mask; role-playing that provides respite; role-playing that removes fear of failure; and the increased confidence in interactions that results. These themes are considered within a framework that unites socio-cultural concepts with concepts drawn from drama theory. Role is seen as an important tool which young people can utilise to escape negative stereotyping and to re-engage with schooling and family.

Keywords: drama intervention; roles; role-playing; at-risk youth; society

Introduction

This paper reports on a nine month study investigating several programmes run by a community theatre in Oxford, which utilise drama-participation as a means of therapeutic and intervention work with at-risk or vulnerable youth. It focuses on one specific theoretical and practical aspect of the data, that of roles and role-playing, and what this aspect enables the young people to do.

At-risk or vulnerable young people are defined in a number of ways in the groups in this study. They may be school-refusers (or at risk of becoming so), or those who have been excluded from school repeatedly for bad behaviour, or those who are sufferers from eating disorders, or have been identified as having low self-esteem or confidence, or who are identified as 'young carers' (children who have responsibility for looking after parents or siblings because of family health issues). These young people are all to some extent disengaged from the social process, or at risk of becoming so by virtue of their relationship (primarily) with school and other people, and we would argue that they are all vulnerable in some way. As a result of this dis-engagement, these young people are less likely to develop the requisite skills for social participation during their teenage years. That is to say, they are less likely to develop the kind of co-operative skills needed for talking and acting in groups; they are less likely to develop empathy with others; they are less likely to be able to control or understand their own behaviour, often linked to their emotional control; and they are more likely to become marginalised and disaffected, removing themselves from society to a greater or lesser extent. The particular risks vary from child to child, and between the different types of vulnerability described above.

By means of participant observation, group interviews and one-to-one interviews, we studied four drama programmes run by the theatre. Each programme has a slightly different structure, and is run for a slightly different group of students in terms of the categories described above. Two of the programmes - New Horizons and In Addition - are ongoing extra-curricular programmes run at the theatre for which the young people are self-selecting. Another two are based at a school, run as eight week intervention programmes for specific groups of students who have been handpicked by the school as likely to benefit from the intervention. For a description of the specific vulnerabilities in each group, see table 1 below.

The aims of all four programmes were similar: to take participants on a journey that:

- Increases self esteem and confidence in participants;
- Enhances their ability to cope with and manage feelings;
- Improves their ability to positively interact with others;
- Provides an opportunity for achievement and success.

Drama in education

In this paper we do not use 'drama in education' to refer to the curricular classroom subject, but to a range of approaches which are used with young people in a variety of environments to enable social development: 'drama reveals itself to be what Heathcote (2006) calls an 'ancient shapeshifter,' capable of adapting and transforming itself to activate many different types of learning by engaging its participants and audiences using approaches ranging from those normally associated with theatre to those that are more improvisational and processual in nature' (Anderson & Dunn 2013: 4). Drama activities in this study ranged from drama games through improvisation to fully scripted or created performances; these bear strong resemblances to normal school drama lessons, but were carried out in a different context. The differences were in the nature and size of the groups, the activity leaders, the place in which they happened and to the change they aimed to create in the young participants' lives. Hughes & Wilson (2004) suggest that participation in youth theatre activities can provide young people with the skills and capacities to enable them to make a successful transition to adulthood, which has a bearing on the kinds of risks we outlined above.

A systematic review of the literature on the effects of performing arts on the health and behaviour of young people concluded that the field was at an early stage (Daykin et al. 2008). There have been an increased number of studies in recent years reporting on the use of drama with adolescents (e.g. Wright 2006; Roy & Ladwig 2015; Wright 2015) but there less on the use of drama with at-risk adolescents. The seven studies which Daykin et al. (2008) eventually included in their review which targeted peer interaction, social skills and empowerment in young people in mainstream settings (i.e. excluding special schools and young offenders) (McArdle et al. 2001; Walsh-Bowers & Basso 1999; Mattingly 2001; Bradley et al. 2004; Douglas et al. 2000; Jackson 2000; Lasic & Kenny 2002) all reported positive results for their participants. Mattingly (2001) showed improvements in at-risk young people's sense of empowerment after participation in a community theatre project which challenge representations of marginalised young people. Arts Council England (2005, 2006) have made the case for use of arts based approaches, and particularly drama, with at-risk young people, particularly in preventing youth offending. The direct impact on behaviour is less well established; Walsh-Bowers & Basso (1999) found positive impacts of drama on social skills and teacher rated interactions on elementary students in Canada, but had mixed results in relation to improvements in behaviour. There is also a limited amount of work on culturally diverse teens with behaviour issues, which suggested drama work could improve social communications and thus behaviour (Anderson 1992; Jackson & Bynum 1997).

One form which is widely studied, particularly in the US, is drama therapy which has been particularly popular for use with young people because of the parallels to play and story-telling (Moneta & Rousseau 2008). McArdle et al. (2002) reported increased well-being and short term improvements in behaviour in at-risk children after drama therapeutic activities. Camilleri (2007) reported a number of creative arts interventions with at-risk youth which they characterised as 'healing the inner city child', with an explicit drama therapeutic focus (ie the intentional use of drama processes to achieve therapeutic ends by counsellors) rather than simple drama. (See

Jennings (2013) for an overview of the practice and theory of drama therapy.)Soble and Long within Camillieri's (2007) book conceptualise the preventative qualities of drama and art therapy as being 'increasing emotional intelligence and critical thinking skills to increase self-esteem and school retention, along with reducing participation in high-risk activities', and 'using mentorship to enhance self-esteem and community involvement' (2007:180). They note the importance of working with the emotions and affect of at-risk youth because purely cognitive anger management programmes (for example) tend not to be effective.

Wright and Rasmussen describe drama as 'linguistic intelligence, embodied knowing and personal intelligence', a form of knowing that 'encourages and celebrates lived and imagined experience, emotions, intuition and creativity in their various forms of representation, and recognises and makes sense of those experiences' (2001: 219). They also identify dramatic pedagogy as one which is able to give young people an 'authentic voice' (ibid.); a pedagogy which hands control over to young people could be an unusual experience for marginalised and at-risk youth, and potentially a significant and life-changing one. Jonothan Neelands, the celebrated drama educator, explicitly links drama education with the creation of democratic citizenship through the ensemble of the drama workshop. Many drama education activities are informed by the work of theorists such as Boal and Freire who are specifically motivated by their reaction against political and social oppression. Drama education, then, has at its core the socially significant motive of bringing about change, often a change towards more democratic inclusion, a motive which is central to its possibilities for marginalised and at-risk young people.

Role-playing and identity

There is considerable research to show that the labelling of young people with various conditions, such as 'EBD', is problematic in the ways that it can define their future interactions, their consideration of their own identity, and how others see them. 'Today it is widely recognised that the language used to describe behaviour problems shapes not only beliefs about the manifest problem, but also perceptions of what could be done about it and whose responsibility it is to do it' Jones (2003:150). Tobell and Lawthom (2005) suggest the need to 'liberate' both children and teachers from the implications of such labels. Other approaches than the one we have taken here might discuss this in terms of agency, or lack of it. In drama, it is more common to talk of role, and this is a term that resonates both in the roles which individuals play in their relationships and in society, and in the roles they might adopt, as in a drama activity.

Role-playing is a particularly significant aspect of drama. Drama participation gives students an opportunity to go into role in a variety of ways: the most obvious way is when they are enacting a scene, through improvisation or through the performance of a script, when they become an actual character. On a less elevated level, it is also a role when, taking part in a drama game, a student becomes a moving part in an ice-cream making machine, composed of the bodies of the group. Within drama-therapy, the role becomes something more akin to an identity, a position in social interaction which an individual adopts or has thrust upon them. The role in this case is conceptualised as something which may be put on or taken off as required.

One plays roles, then, primarily to get in and out of oneself and to master both that which is situated inside, the role taken and outside, the objective world. The more competently one plays out one's roles, the more one will develop an ease in navigating the sometimes difficult boundaries between internal and external experience. (Landy 1993: 40)

Navigating through different fictitious roles in a drama environment can be a useful way of laying 'claim to the best-functioning everyday ones' (Landy 1993: 30). As Daniels and Downes note (2015), this is a distinctly different concept from that which suggests drama allows you to 'express yourself'; instead, you are able to explore that which is not you, a means of trying on a different person. Daniels and Downes refer to classroom drama, while Landy is from the field of drama-therapy, but the same sentiment applies to the middle ground of small group drama interventions such as those we describe here. Acting in role as another 'allows one to use another person/ fictional character as a pivot to detach emotions that are personal from the self and relive them through another' and thus 'allows one to be that which one could not imagine without this process' (Ferholt 2015: 68). Hughes and Wilson conceptualise drama spaces as being 'liminal':

Liminal space or liminoid activities provide a place/time outside of normal routines where people (temporarily) shed their ascribed roles and identities and experiment with a new range of expression in a different social reality. Such activities have important personal and social functions: they provide emotional release, enhance function in day-to-day life, change the way someone or something is perceived or understood and can add significantly to quality of life. (2004: 69)

A number of different approaches therefore, see the boundary between real life and the imagined as being central to drama activities. This crux between the imagined and the real is crucial, as we discuss below.

Significantly this approach to role enables students to 'experience a change in subject position' (Daniels & Downes 2015: 110) which they can reflect on and learn from. Role in this viewpoint is akin to the concept of identity as expressed in the work of Gee (2001) and specifically the D-identity, the identity carved out of the Discourse framework in which the individual finds themselves. Discourses here are 'combinations of ways of speaking, acting and interacting, dressing, feeling, believing and valuing, and using objects tools or technologies' (Walker, Anderson, Gibson & Martin 2015: 118). An individual's Discourse or D-identity requires their recognition by others as being a certain kind of person within that Discourse. This is easily exemplified by the child who is 'recognised' or labelled as 'behaviourally challenging'; this D-identity may be carried around with the child at school, and beyond, but is not an identity which they would necessarily have given themselves, although they may then adopt it, emphasise or react against it. Individuals can also bid for different identities to be recognised within the Discourse that they are in. Many of these identities overlap with the socially-recognised and constrained roles recognised in role theory, such as 'pupil', 'teacher', 'mother', 'child' etc.

Drama experiences, then, which involve the adoption of role, either within a mimicked Discourse framework or within an entirely different one, give young people an opportunity to 'play at identity' in an environment which Walker, Anderson, Gibson & Martin term a 'relatively "penalty free zone" to experiment with and manipulate different kinds of identities to understand the implications of the choices they make' (2015: 116). This experience allows troubled and marginalised young people to move outside of the Discourse-identities which have been ascribed to them, and which constrain them, to identify new paths and to bid for new identities. The key is not just the imagined experience, but also the juxtaposition of the real and the imagined.

The crux between the imagined and the real

Within drama, the meeting of the imagined and the real is a key concept. Augusto Boal, the drama theorist, drew on Plato for the concept of metaxis, the state of being 'between'. Boal speaks of metaxis as:

[T]he state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image. The participant shares and belongs to these two autonomous worlds; their reality and the image of their reality, which she herself has created. (Boal 1995: 43)

Metaxis is a crux between the real and the imagined space, between the experience of the imagination and the experience of the real. As a result, Boal argues, 'the scene, the stage, becomes the rehearsal space for real life' (1995: 43). Metaxis is of particular importance when considering at-risk youth because it is the crux not only between real and imagined experience but between our inner selves and the social world in which we exist. Without it we cannot develop the 'social imagination' (Greene 1995), the ability to see the world as potentially different; and by extension ourselves and our own situations. 'The space of dramatic metaxis occurs in the moments questions arise, when we ask, what if things could be different?' (Linds 2006). In our study this becomes particularly pertinent in relation to the role-playing of prior experience. In terms of the lives of vulnerable and at-risk young people, many of whom are, as suggested above, negatively stereotyped and finding it hard to alter the D-identities which they have been assigned, the question of imagining 'being other' and indeed experiencing it through the life of the imagination, is crucial.

Strongly aligned with metaxis, and drawn from the broadly socio-cultural theoretical framework within which we conducted this study, are the Vygotskian concepts of dual affect and *perezhivanie*. Dual affect is the experience of being both yourself and another at the same time. It is most easily conveyed through the image of two young children playing 'doctors': a child can be both themselves and a patient, both themselves and a doctor. This 'double subjectivity' allows the children the safe space to experiment emotionally: through the development of empathy they can experience fear (of an injection, for example) but can withdraw from that fear at any time. This example comes from Vygotsky himself, who commented that the child simultaneously 'weeps in play as patient, but revels as a player' (1976: 549).

Perezhivanie, meanwhile, has been conceptualised by Peter Smagorinsky as 'emotional experience' (2011). Vygotsky and the famous theatre director Stanislavski both used it to talk of an actor who is really living his role rather than simply pretending to be someone else (Grainger Clemson 2015), but it is also a term that evokes the inextricability of the affective experience from the cognitive. It is through lived emotion that the child develops: they learn about the world by pretending to be someone else within it, and at the same time they are able to develop their own emotional regulation. This relates to the emphasis placed on the affective versus the solely cognitive in interventions by Sobel and Long (2007).

The combination of *perezhivanie* and dual affect make for successful metaxis, and it is this cross-over between reality and the imagined which makes for the successful use of role; these key concepts supported our hypothesis that drama interventions with at-risk students might enable those students to free themselves from the constraints of their current interactions with school, family and society in general, by giving the opportunity to practise being 'other'. This is the essence of role-taking.

Methods

Research was carried out through a combination of qualitative methods. Four programmes were identified by the community theatre for the researchers to access; two extra-curricular programmes and two eight week interventions at a local school. For a summary see table 1.

The New Horizons group consisted of young women who were deemed to be vulnerable. They ranged in age from secondary students to post-secondary school age, that is from about 12 to 20. The number of young women varied from week to week, with those attending ranging from five up to eight. The group met weekly for approximately an hour. Prior to this hour the group met at the theatre's cafe, which was a space for the young women to informally catch up with each other and the key workers. This was also a space in which the researchers were able to connect with the young women. During the hour of the activity the young women were developing a drama piece in preparation for a performance to their family and friends.

The School Plus group involved two groups of year 7 students (aged between 11-12yrs) who were selected by the school to participate in the programme. The students attended the programme for seven weeks, with individual sessions lasting an hour and a half. This represented a double period of school time, so students referred for the programme missed one curriculum lesson a week. The school chose students for group 1 based upon behavioural issues such as truancy, lateness or disruptiveness in lessons. For group 2 the students were young carers or vulnerable for another reason, and most had confidence issues which manifested themselves in extreme quietness or extreme loudness. Group 1 participants came to the theatre for most sessions; group 2 met in a variety of school locations, most commonly a maths classroom with furniture pushed back to the walls to create an open space.

In Addition was and continues to be a programme that runs each academic term on a weekly basis. The students involved were aged between 12 and 18yrs from both vulnerable and less vulnerable groups, a deliberate strategy adopted by the theatre. Some young people were referred via the social services hub. Less vulnerable young people were members of the existing youth theatre or had been involved with the other theatre groups and were chosen as peer mentors.

Table 1

New Horizons	Theatre	Ongoing	14-22	Vulnerable young women	Devised performance
In Addition	Theatre	Ongoing	14-18	Mixture of at risk and engaged teenagers of both sexes	Scripted performance
School Plus (one)	Theatre/ School	8 weeks	11-12	Disengaged/ badly behaved students in their first year of secondary school	Arts Award
School Plus (two)	School	8 weeks	11-12	Young carers in their first year of secondary school, many with confidence	Arts Award ¹

¹ The Arts Award is a national qualification which involves evidencing arts participation, attendance and leadership in a more or less limited way.

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The names of the groups have been changed and individual students are referred to by initials.

A group of five researchers (including the authors) conducted field work with the different groups with one or two researchers attending one or more of the programmes. Researchers took part in groups as participant observers, taking a full part in activities and were regarded by the participants as half way between being a participant (by virtue of the way we acted, taking part in the activities) and a leader (by virtue of our adult status). We were occasionally directed by group leaders to act in what might be seen as a 'teaching assistant' role, for example, in working with a student to complete their Arts Award booklet. Ongoing and direct participation with the young people enabled the researchers to build up a rapport with the groups they were working with, which led to richer data collection. During these sessions the young people would at times share their thoughts and feelings with the observers. After these observations field notes were recorded. At the end of each project the individuals were interviewed with a structured questionnaire of approximately 20 minutes. In addition some group interviews were conducted, some structured evaluations tasks were conducted and group leaders were interviewed at the beginning and end of the research period. All interview data was transcribed and coding was carried out independently by three researchers on a sample of data. Subsequently codes were compared and a coding structure agreed. Although this was an inductive process, it was informed by prior reading of the literature, such as that reviewed above.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC). The research team also followed the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA 2011). Informed consent was gained from the participants, their parents or guardians and from the activity leaders. Young people were reminded of their ability to withdraw or not answer any question at the beginning of the interview process, and were for the most part keen to share their reflections and ideas about their experience. Research participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Analysis

This paper considers just one theme that emerged from the data - that of roles and role playing, which was also sometimes expressed by participants in the form of 'masks', and also the development of confidence (which was closely related to role-playing). Other themes that we identified were those of the safe space, trusting relationships, and autonomy of choice. The interviews revealed that the most important part of the drama interventions was not the content, but the process. Some activities were specifically didactic, such as the beanbag game. In this game participants stand in a circle, and a bean bag is thrown from one person to another in a repeated pattern. After a few rounds, additional beanbags are introduced, but the pattern remains the same. To be successful, the participants must reach a collaborative rhythm, with smooth and gentle passing, in time with one another. If the pattern can be maintained successfully, one person may lie down in the middle of the circle and watch the beanbags crossing over head. The reflection led after this game was designed to show the importance of working together, and of co-operation. All participants enjoyed it when this game was played in School Plus, and it was a frequently demanded

game. The interviews and observation data demonstrated, however, that it was not the message that participants took away, but the metacognitive process of reflecting on what they had been doing and what that might show them about 'real life', reflecting on the *metaxis* as it were, was one which some participants were later able to demonstrate independently. Learning about group work happened more organically over time, rather than through the (well-designed) pedagogically appropriate activities.

In the extracts below, subsections of the themes of role-playing and confidence are presented. Broadly they move from the more negative interpretations of 'role' towards more positive ones, which represented a stronger development of the skills that would enable students to become active citizens and participants in their social world.

The unwanted role

Many participants, particularly in the theatre-based groups, identified the idea of an unwanted role imposed on them externally, usually by school.

"I think at school we have to pretend that we're this set role and we have to apply to everything whereas here it doesn't really matter, we can be ourselves" (New Horizons)

Freedom from this imposed role was a common theme through the data; it also co-existed with concepts of judgement, and being judged. In particular in the theatre-based groups there was a sense that participants felt the value of not being pre-judged according to the label they came in with ('naughty'; 'badly behaved'; 'anti-social'; 'low achiever'). This was not seen in the school-based groups. This is likely to be because the theatre-based groups were significantly older, and more likely to have felt the impact of school-imposed labels. The participants in the School and School Plus groups were in their first year of secondary school and had been identified as being at risk of later disengagement, rather than current disengagement, which may explain this disparity. The children in School and School Plus were also generally unaware of why they had been targeted, so perhaps would not feel as strongly about the pre-conceptions of others about them. This strongly relates to the D-identity (Gee 2001), in the identity or role which had been accorded to young people without their consent and which they felt dominated their lives.

Role-playing through previous experiences

During some sessions researchers noted participants drawing on their previous personal histories in the improvisations they created.

"Before performing the scene, **A** was asked to play the role of the teacher.

At the end of the scene, everyone helped **A** to develop his lines. Whilst doing this **J** said that **A** needed to be a Head teacher as:

J: "The Head teacher is the one who has control over who is excluded"

The group came up with the first two lines:

"Rose you're excluded, that was assault"

"But Sir"

A was then stuck with what to say next. **J** automatically said "I don't want to hear it, now go, leave." It felt as if **J** was reflecting on her own experience of exclusion to help create the lines."

In this case, the previous knowledge of a specific participant (J) was useful to create a realistic drama for a circumstance of which the others had no experience; it was also revelatory to the researcher as the automaticity of the response suggested a hurtful previous experience of exclusion, in which J had felt shut down and unable to respond. This working through of previous experiences, either in the same role or a different role, is frequently seen in the drama therapy literature as a significant therapeutic moment (Jones, 1991), where the cross-over between the real and imagined world is very close, but the participant has the ability to move in and out of character, to manage the emotional reaction which the interaction stimulates. It may even prove a moment in which the negative emotion can be detached and removed from the actor, through the 'pivot' of the fictitious role (Ferholt 2015: 68).

The protective mask

Some participants saw a role as a 'mask' which they could wear to hide their true selves when in public. The drama group was seen as a 'safe' space in which they could be themselves but in the outside world, it gave them skills that enabled them to survive.

(Current position on school) "Since I [now] go everyday, I would guess this [group] was a very big factor. It helped with like controlling my emotions, and like hiding it well, without actually having to hide it from professionals and stuff, and like helping me boost my confidence, and how I feel and how I feel about what I look like." (New Horizons)

"See I use acting stuff from here in my general life because before people could read me like a book but now I've sort of learnt an acting skill so nobody can actually tell now that I've just had a terrible day." (New Horizons)

This protective mask can be seen more or less negatively, but one of the things that it helps participants to do is to interact with society without feeling too vulnerable; to protect their emotional well-being. With many of the participants this meant that they were able to interact in a more appropriate way, without allowing their (negative) emotional reactions to dominate their interactions with others. Other participants linked this to their ability to be less angry or grumpy with others, which also improved their experience of working with others outside the group.

Although students perceived this role as protective, it was also a way for them to negotiate themselves into (or 'bid for' (Gee 2001)) alternative identities and roles, within the wider Discourse environments in which they participate. Although they saw these identities as distinctive roles or masks which they were assuming, it is likely that adopting them on a regular basis could bring them to be more instinctual and firmly embedded in their perceptions of themselves. Further research or a more longitudinal study would be valuable in ascertaining the ongoing impact. The skills they acquired through drama participation, therefore, enabled them to 'be other' in their everyday lives, and experience the consequences that has.

Role-playing that provides a break

Some participants identified the adoption of role as a way of stepping outside their own problems and lives for a while, which contributed to the mood management which also appeared as a benefit of the 'mask'.

"I think one thing that acting definitely helps you do is, you can have all this, all these problems going on in your own lives, and have all this stress, but if you take on another character, that can all go for a little bit, and it's a good way of relaxing yourself, and taking your mind off it, because if you're in school the entire day, and say your minds not quite on the school work, it's more on problems, they stay on the problems it kind of gets worse, but if you come - just do any kind of hobby but acting I think especially completely takes your mind off it because you're thinking right, this is a new person, taking that person's thoughts on to get rid of your own it's quite a nice way of kind of cleaning the slate and getting yourself in a better mind state." (In Addition)

Dealing with emotion in this way is important for regulation of the self (see for example Pekun et al. 2002). This is also a skill for social participation because of the way in which self-regulation impacts on interaction with others. We saw during our observations that for many of these young people the role or identity which they acted in everyday life was both challenging and dissatisfying for them, but they could see no way out of it. The respite that role-playing or drama provided for them gave them a period in which they could rest from being themselves, and throw themselves fully into another character - experiencing the full Stanislavskian *perezhivanie*. Participants in the School Plus groups varied in their ability to embrace the role in this way, being more or less involved in the drama games and activities. Those who were able to fully embrace the role they were engaging in were also those who were more positive about the experience and its outcomes during the exit interviews.

Role-playing that removes the fear of failure

The fear of failure can be one of the primary obstacles that stops students engaging in successful learning in school (see Martin & Marsh 2003). It tends to be those who cannot successfully negotiate the academic world who are at risk of becoming disengaged from school and from society more broadly. Being able to experiment enabled students to become less concerned about failure during the drama sessions. This transferred outside the intervention, into being able to have a go at answering in lessons.

"for me it's a way of taking your mind off stuff, because you can become someone else that you wouldn't actually be? You don't have to worry about doing something wrong that you wouldn't normally do because it's not technically you doing it, because you are doing it for a performance. "
(School plus)

"Like say if I got the question wrong, I don't really mind, because I know I tried." (School plus)

Through role-adoption, students were able to engage in action, because the role separated them

from the risks of performing in school and failing. The participants in the School plus group in particular were able to reflect on the extent to which all school life is a performance, and in regarding it as such – and any public interaction as a performance – they were able to put themselves forward in a way which they would not have been confident to do so before. The dual affect is clearly at work here, as the students are able to feel more or less themselves as much as it is useful for them to do so.

Confidence in interactions

As well as the confidence in the classroom inspired by the concept of 'pupil as performance', students also demonstrated an increased confidence in talking to people and working in groups. They identified to a certain extent a sense of being valued in drama groups, and feeling less of a need for attention-seeking behaviour in lessons.

For some students the practical elements of drama were enough to give them confidence to interact with others in a wider arena:

"So in a classroom I always had to like, I would always have to put my opinions in at the end because I couldn't speak up in front of people, but now I can speak up in front of a few more people, not like a whole class, but it's improved my confidence to be able to speak up in front of more people." (In Addition)

For others, especially those who had been identified for reasons of isolation such as the young carers group, the experience of working closely in small groups was valuable because it cemented new friendships, and gave them the confidence to interact with new people. This was especially powerful for one 12 year old:

"[Before] I wouldn't really want to talk to them because I'm too shy or something, but now because I can like express my feelings with this [theatre] thing, I can go and say hi" (School plus)

This increased confidence affects the role the individuals can play in society: they move from being isolated individuals to being a part of a cohesive group, but more importantly part of a larger group also, in this case the school, but potentially society as a whole.

Conclusion

In this paper we have identified a number of different ways in which roles and role-playing was part of the discourse surrounding the drama experiences for the at-risk young people, within their own words, but not only in terms of the role in the purely dramatic sense, but in terms of the roles they adopted within their own lives. Many of these experiences of role link directly to ameliorating their negative experiences in communicating with family, teachers and participating in school and society. As such, role is clearly an important feature for at-risk and vulnerable children, in enabling them to engage with those around them in a positive way, and in allowing them to escape from the negative connotations of the labels with which they have found themselves, or even simply by 'being Other' to discover that the roles they have been assigned are not the only roles which they can fulfil

successfully. The interventions were of different time durations, but it is interesting that a clear potential shift was observed even in the short eight week programs.

In these drama programmes, the drama experiences were central to this putting on of new roles (in both senses of the word). There was clear evidence of the 'social imagination' (Greene 1995) which enables young people to envisage the world as different, both in their interview responses, and in their improvisation and other activities we observed. Richard Courtney has theorised the way in which drama enables us to do this: by creating a fictional imitation of the world, we are able to compare the actual one with our fictional counterpart and to see the world as it might be (1990; 1995). 'In this way, young people can compare the actual with the fictional, and it is the 'as if' of drama in particular that allows us to project and transform what we know, and potentially who we are' (Wright & Rasmussen 2001: 222). This might operate particularly powerfully with the reliving of past experience, as in J's intervention in the improvisation about exclusion described above, but it also works within other aspects of the drama experience. For some of the students who took part in no extended dramatic work beyond the drama games such as pretending to be parts of a machine, or leading blindfolded others (that is, those in the School Plus groups), there was still a clear shift in their understanding of role in real life, and the ways in which they could create 'pupil as performance' to enable them to navigate beyond their previous difficulties. There appears to be something about the *metaxis* - the meeting of the imagined and the real - which released some of these young people from whatever conjunction of identity, circumstance and role (adopted or assigned) had previously been causing them to behave in challenging ways, lose confidence, attention-seeking or feel unable to participate fully in the world of school or work.

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