

Glebe Public School Success Story- Improving inferential comprehension in year 5 (2017-8)

Glebe Public School has an enrolment of approximately 300 students from Kindergarten to Year 6. Forty-one percent of students at the school identify as having EAL/D and 18% of students identify as Aboriginal. The Index of Community Socio-Education Advantage (ICSEA) value of the school is 1019, which has steadily increased since records began in 2008 when the school received a value of 937 (under the average score of 1000; ACARA, 2017). The school strongly embraces their local Indigenous community and often community members volunteer in the classroom. Due to the diversity of students, the school employs a Community Liaison Officer, a Chinese speaking Student Learning Support Officer and an Aboriginal Education Officer to support students, parents and teachers

The School has been working with Sydney Theatre Company's *School Drama* program¹ every year since the program began its pilot study in 2009. *School Drama* refers to the teacher professional learning program developed by Sydney Theatre Company in partnership with The University of Sydney. A teaching artist works with a primary classroom teacher in a co-mentoring model to co-plan, co-teach and co-mentor each other over a school term focussing on using drama with quality literature to explore one or more English or literacy learning outcomes.

In 2011 the then Principal, Vicki Pogulis, credited "thriving partnerships with elite organisations as varied as theatre companies [...] and universities have contributed to the pronounced rise in academic performance at Glebe Public School in recent years" (Burke, SMH, 2011, p.16). Current principal, Bryce Walker says, "As a school we selected this program carefully because it has a strong research background and meets the diverse literacy and literary needs of our students, both those who need more support and those who are high achievers."

This particular case study was undertaken in Term 3, 2017 with a Year 5 class of 26 learners, 16 girls and 10 boys taught by Mr Jacobs. The research was undertaken by Dr John Nicholas Saunders with permission of the School Principal, class teacher, parents and students and was approved by the University of Sydney Ethics Committee. Five participant students spoke languages other than English at home representing 19% of student in the class being from EAL/D backgrounds. Nine students (34%) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Pseudonyms have been used for the teacher and students.

The literacy focus chosen for the seven week program was inferential comprehension and the book chosen for close study was the refugee story *Home and Away* (Marsden & Ottley, 2008). The story is set in Sydney in the present day and the text starts with introducing the reader to the boy's family and surroundings as a war gets closer to Australia and Sydney falls. A series of diary entries from the boy's perspective relates how the family decide to get on a boat to escape and go to a fictional country called Hollania. On arrival, they are locked up in a refugee camp. This powerful text turns the refugee experience on its head. So often in Australia we think of refugees as 'the others' and their experience as foreign from our own. As a group the students developed a profile of a fictional country whose inhabitants declared war with Australia because they didn't like our brand of democracy and they wanted our natural resources.

Over the seven-week drama-based intervention several shifts were noted by students in their focus groups and surveys; by their class teacher; by analysis of the student benchmarking samples; and through reflections and observations in the researcher's journal. A snapshot of the evidence follows.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking refers specifically to the student work samples collected before and after the *School Drama* intervention. Sample benchmarking tasks and criteria (rubrics) aligned to curriculum specific outcomes in the New South Wales (NSW) English syllabus are provided for each of the focus literacy areas as tools to support teachers in measuring student achievement over the term. The pre- and post-tasks were designed and

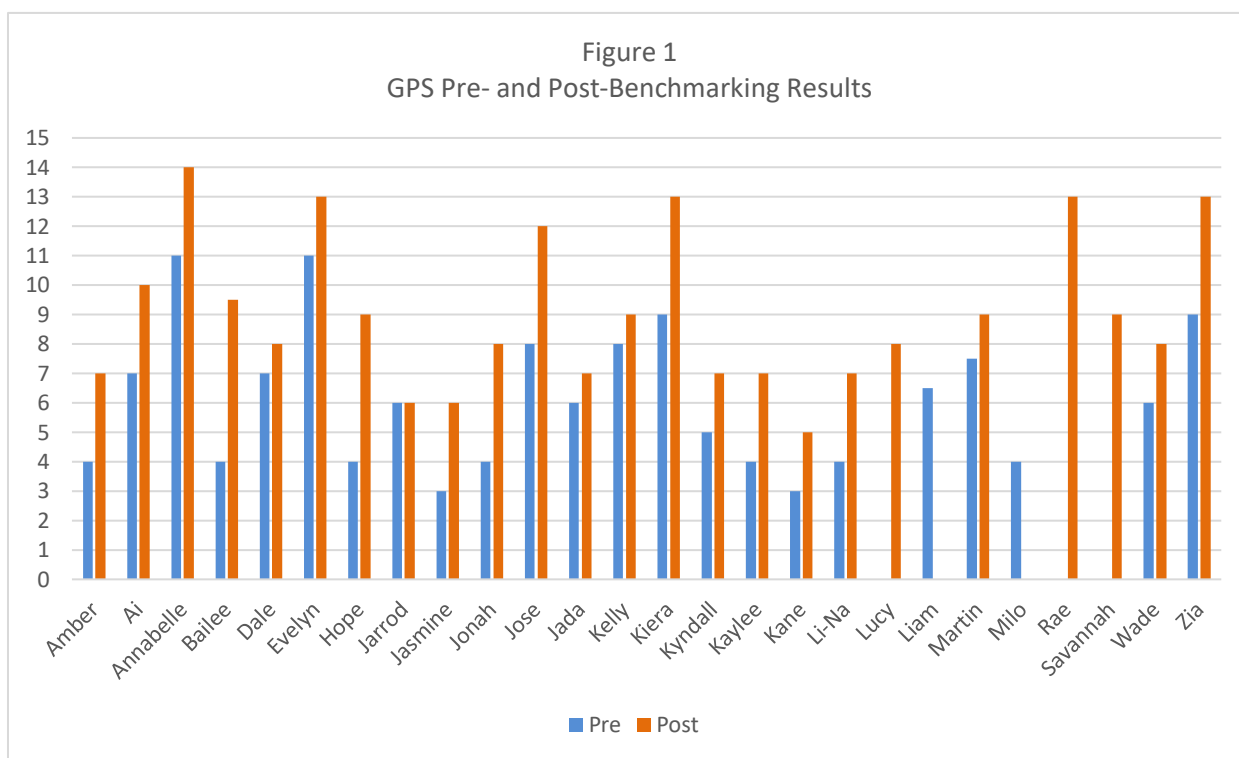
¹ For more detail about *School Drama* see <https://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education/teacher-learning/school-drama>

assessed by the classroom teacher and were administered in the normal timeframe. The benchmarking tasks were assessed on a fifteen point continuum (E- being 1 and A+ being 15).

The pre-program benchmarking task was conducted in Week One, Term Three and required the students to write a diary entry based on their previous two terms' work, in role as a character in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling, 1998) who was arriving at Hogwarts for the first time. The post-program task required students to write a diary entry in role as the main character in *Home and Away* (whom we called Tee) as he arrived in Hollania. Of the 26 students in the class, all participated in the research study although four students were absent from school when the benchmarking tasks were completed.

Figure 1 below depicts the pre- (blue bar) and post-benchmarking (red bar) results. Out of the 21 complete sets of benchmarking tasks, 12 students received a below C- grade (below 7 marks) before the intervention. In the post-benchmarking task, ten of these students moved above a C- (7 marks), one student (Jarrod) maintained his score of a D+, and another student (Kane) increased his score moving from an E+ (3 marks) to a D (5 marks). The benchmarking analysis demonstrated positive shifts in students' inferential comprehension after the intervention.

Figure 1 GPS Pre- and Post-Benchmarking Results



The girls were generally receiving higher grades on literacy tasks and these were maintained through the intervention. There was a similar improvement in boys' and girls' writing in the post-program benchmarking task. On average, girls received a score of 6.5 for the pre-test (representing a D+) and a score of 9.3 for the post-task (representing C+) with a shift of 3 marks. The average boys' pre- intervention grade of 5.4 (representing a D) and post-program tasks received an average grade of 8 (representing a C) with a general upward shift of 2.5 marks.

Student focus groups

Students in focus groups conducted at various times through the intervention discussed how they were interpreting the book differently, engaging in the themes and thinking critically about what happens between events. Comments included:

I think that we are engaging with it differently because, if you had of just read this normally, just flicking through, um you probably wouldn't have thought about what they could be thinking at the time or what they could have said between those illustrations and speech marks that they have in the book. So yeah I think we are definitely interpreting the book differently. (Annabelle)

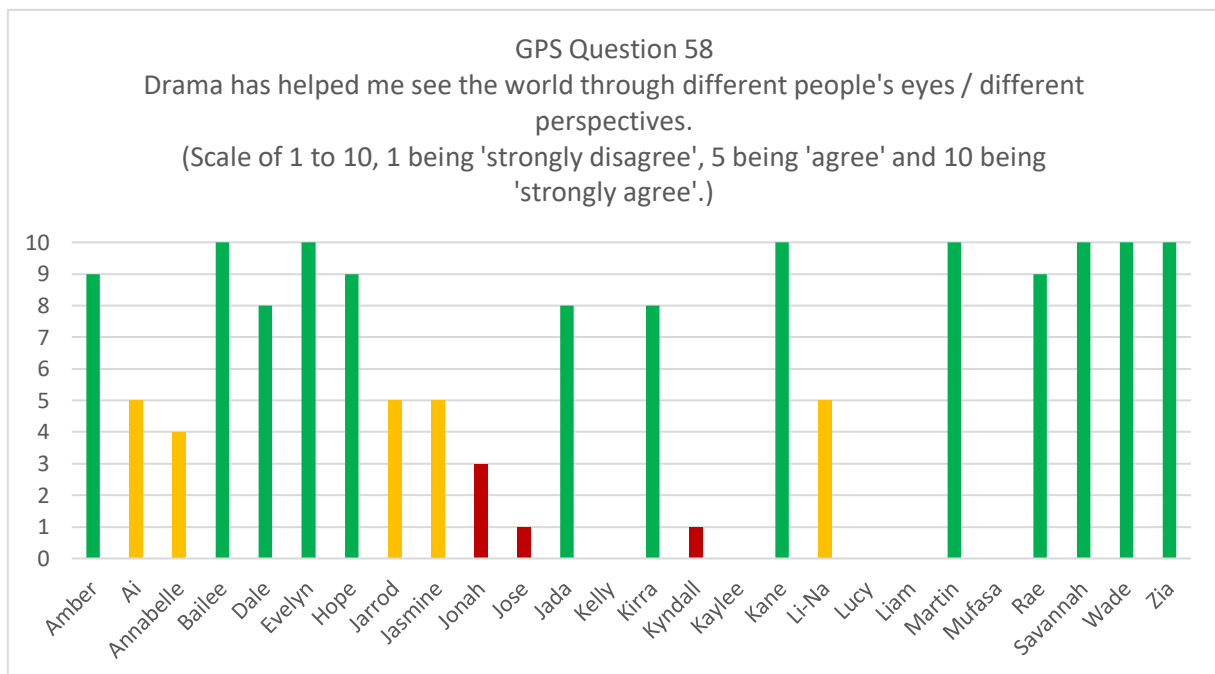
Different, because like every week we learn about one of their problems and we have to work out what like happens to them and like what will happen next. (Liam)

Because like it's not just like the same as reading a book and then you're just like 'oh ok' ... you are like hooked on to see the next chapter, or like the next page I guess. And then you get to like act it out in your own way and you get to like choose like how you act it out. (Amber)

Surveys

Emotion and empathy were central themes in the focus groups in this case study, and through engaging emotions and empathising with characters, students felt that they made stronger connections to the text. Connection is one of the Super Six Comprehension Strategies (NSWDET, 2010). Figure 2 provides an example:

Figure 1 GPS Question 58



Of the 21 students, 18 either agreed or strongly agreed that drama had helped them see the world through other people's eyes and take on other perspectives.

I like it better when we are acting it out and stuff and we get to re-create the scenes and feel like what the characters feel like. And if you are just reading it inside, like in a normal English lesson, you don't really connect with the characters than when you are acting them out. (Evelyn)

Interviews with class teacher

Several interviews were conducted with the class teacher including one twelve months after the drama intervention. The class teacher reported that the episodic text model combined with drama-based pedagogy was enabling deeper exploration of the text, increased ability to predict, and increased enjoyment about engagement in the learning. He explained that he felt that this was because students are able to take on the character:

I think that the thing that the *School Drama* program gives that other things do not, is that it has so many engaging activities that can just ... it breaks down the text bit by bit, whereas I think that if we

just sort of discussed each bit of the text, the kids would just get bored with it. So, I really feel like they've enjoyed predicting what's going to happen. They've ... really improved their ability to predict what is going to happen and then they really enjoy the reveal of what actually happens ... just bringing the enjoyment out of that is massive.

In addition, he felt it was the active, embodied nature of drama that engaged students and that because they were embodying the characters, they increased their empathy and connection and understanding of the characters and text as a result.

Being able to *become* a character in the book and think about their position and what's happening in their lives, now that they've gotten better with doing that, I definitely think they've been able to take on perspectives really well and consider different perspectives.

Summative comments

The case study demonstrated positive shifts in student literacy in the area of inferential comprehension through the benchmarking analysis. All students increased their literacy score after the drama intervention suggesting that drama can particularly support students who find English and literacy learning more challenging or who are less proficient in this academic area. Glebe Public School students involved in this study also made connections between the use of drama, the style of the episodic text model and their ability to infer and comprehend.

Together with the students' responses to the surveys, their focus group comments and the teachers' interviews, the findings suggest that using drama-rich strategies can enhance student English and literacy learning especially those who find English and literacy learning challenging. Glebe Public School students also made connections between the use of drama, the style of the episodic text model and their ability to engage with the characters. The data also suggested links between increased empathy and emotion through the learning experiences alongside a stronger connection to the text, characters and story. The teacher felt the students' opportunities to undertake embodied learning through drama led to increased engagement in learning and in school. Working collaboratively in drama also led to more positive peer relationships in the classroom.

It is clear that the beliefs and practices of the school leaders and teachers at Glebe Public School align with the Touchstones that underpin the Foundation for Learning and Literacy. The use of drama with quality literature has had a sustained impact on both teachers' pedagogical approaches and on student engagement and literacy learning.

This School Success Story is a living demonstration in particular of three of the Touchstones:

3. Reading and writing are both pleasure and power. They allow us to participate in the real world, escape from reality and to imagine alternative worlds. These purposes should be at the heart of teaching children and young people to tell stories, read and write.

4. Creativity and imagination matter in ongoing literacy learning

9. Effective literacy teaching and learning need to continue beyond the early years as texts increase in complexity.

For further reading see:

Ewing, R. (2018). Making a difference in learning through arts-rich pedagogy. ACER Research Conference, Sydney.

Ewing, R. & Saunders, J. (2016). *The School Drama Book: Drama, Literature and Literacy in the Creative Classroom*. Currency Press Sydney