



Throughout the program's history, School Drama has been delivered in many locations across Australia and even New Zealand.

School Drama pairs primary classroom teachers with Sydney Theatre Company (STC) Teaching Artists in a unique co-mentoring partnership. Teaching Artists are actors, community artists and drama experts with an interest in utilising their skills in education contexts. Over the course of a school term, the teacher and Teaching Artist co-plan, co-teach and co-mentor each other during weekly workshops and debriefs. In the classroom, quality children's literature is explored through drama-rich strategies to help students make new connections to texts, each other and their world. School Drama was developed by STC over a four-year pilot program, in partnership with The University of Sydney and leading academic Professor Emerita Robyn Ewing AM.

# School Drama™

## STUDENT IMPACT

**Since 2009, over 35,000 students and teachers across Australia and New Zealand have participated in the program.**

A wealth of existing research focuses on various aspects of the program, including the sustainable impact on teachers and their teaching practice, the impact of the program on students who are learning English as an additional language, and the impact on Teaching Artists.

Sydney Theatre Company and The University of Sydney embarked on a research project to better understand the impact of School Drama on students. This research was led by Dr John Nicholas Saunders, School Drama Program Associate.

In three primary schools across Sydney, three classes (including 68 students and 3 teachers) participated in the research, including pre- and post-benchmarking literacy tasks, interviews, focus group discussions, and a student survey.

Results show that participation in School Drama led to significant improvements in literacy, engagement, collaboration and empathy, with notable results for male-identifying and less proficient students.

**“I understand people’s actions more and some of the words we used in drama I didn’t know of, therefore when I found out what they meant it boosted my vocabulary.”**

Levi, student



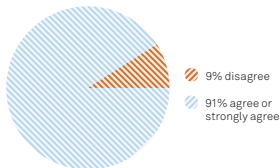
Student from Artarmon Public School participating in a School Drama workshop with STC Teaching Artist and Richard Wherrett Fellow Courtney Stewart. Photo: Hon Boey

## LITERACY

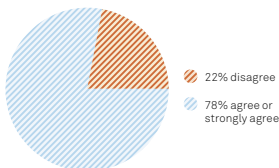
Literacy is the capacity, confidence and disposition to use language in all its forms (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). This School Drama research project focused on how Drama-rich teaching approaches helped students to build their skills in comprehension and inference, leading to a deeper understanding of texts.

Comparing literacy results from the beginning to the end of the School Drama program, 91% of students improved their literacy score, while 9% of students maintained it. Generally, male-identifying students in these case studies started at a lower point on the literacy scale and demonstrated a more significant shift overall during the term.

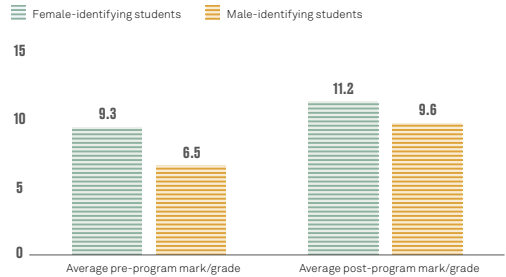
WHEN STUDENTS WERE ASKED IF THEY “FIND IT EASIER TO WRITE FOLLOWING DRAMA SESSIONS”



WHEN STUDENTS WERE ASKED IF THEY “LEARN BETTER WHEN WE USE DRAMA IN THE CLASSROOM”



AVERAGE BENCHMARKING SCORES BROKEN DOWN BY GENDER BASED ON A 15 POINT SCALE FROM E- TO A-



Female-identifying students, on average, started with a higher grade and shifted by an average of 1.9 marks over a 7 week teaching period. In contrast, some of the male-identifying students failed the pre-program task, receiving a grade of D+ or lower. Male-identifying students, on average, moved over an entire grade (3.1 marks) from the pre-program task to the post-program task. Students who achieved in the D and E range in the pre-program benchmarking tasks had some of the largest shifts in their literacy over the seven-week intervention. Many of these were male-identifying students.

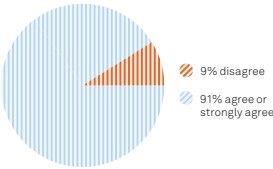
In reflecting on the students’ literacy improvements, Jacob, a teacher at Gungahlin Public School commented, “I do remember noticing that the depth in which they were writing and their ability to connect to the characters was hugely improved... It just gives them such an empathy towards the characters and they can understand a lot more, how they feel. So I’m not shocked by the growth during drama, but it is definitely more significant than I would normally expect.”

# ENGAGEMENT

Motivation and engagement are central to students' interest in and enjoyment of what they are doing (Martin, Collie and Evans, 2016). Shifts in student engagement through drama and drama-based experiences is also consistent with existing research (see for example: Mansour, 2013; Martin et al., 2013; Fleming et al., 2016). The embodied nature of learning through drama often translates as a fun and engaging experience, leading to positive shifts in student engagement.

Students participating in the research reflected that they felt more engaged in learning as a result of School Drama, a reflection that was reinforced through teacher and researcher observations and student survey data. Students and teachers also linked their increased engagement to the active and embodied learning approaches of School Drama. Students regularly commented that the drama work was 'fun' and 'enjoyable'. Ninety-one percent of students agreed that they felt more engaged in school after participating in drama.

WHEN STUDENTS WERE ASKED IF THEY "FEEL MORE ENGAGED IN SCHOOL AFTER PARTICIPATING IN DRAMA"



**"Working in the group I am able to use my imagination much easier and figure out what's going on."**

Chase, student

# COLLABORATION

Drama is a highly collaborative approach to learning; in School Drama, students work together to make meaning and explore moments in the text.

Students and teachers alike reflected that the drama-based intervention led to improvement of their collaboration skills. They also linked working collaboratively to learning from their peers and receiving feedback from their peers that supported their learning. This was in contrast to traditional learning when they would often only receive feedback from their teacher. Students in the study often commented that they preferred working in a group as they learned from their peers and that learning was more enjoyable in this way.

These results are also consistent with existing research and theory that drama and Arts-based experiences can improve student collaboration (Harris, 2016; Hunter, 2005; Robinson with Aronica, 2015).



Students from Whalan Public School participating in a School Drama workshop with STC Teaching Artist Georgia Adamson. Photo: Prudence Upton



**"Drama helps to relax me and help me by making the activities more active and exciting."**

Amanda, student

Students from Woollahra Primary School participating in a School Drama workshop. Photo: Grant Sparkes-Carroll

# EMPATHY

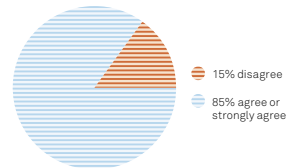
A central notion to drama is the idea of 'stepping into the shoes of someone else' and hence developing empathy. School Drama encourages students to consider alternative perspectives in texts. Students make personal connections from the text to their life by drawing parallels between their life and the life of the characters. They can make connections from the text explored in School Drama to other texts that they have read before. Students also make connections from the text and drama to the world, particularly as they infer and fill in gaps within the text to make and create meaning.



Students from Artarmon Public School participating in a School Drama workshop. Photo: Hon Boey

Drama engaged students' emotions and senses through the aesthetic experience. Through this experience, students developed empathy and connection to character as well as skills in perspective taking. A large majority of students (75%) reported that School Drama helped them make stronger connections to the characters in books. Similarly, most students reported shifts in how they thought about characters as a result of drama.

WHEN STUDENTS WERE ASKED IF "DRAMA HAS HELPED (THEM) SEE THE WORLD THROUGH DIFFERENT PEOPLE'S EYES/ DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES"



Students also indicated they had become a more empathetic and caring person through School Drama. The shifts in empathy, connection to character and perspective taking align with existing research (Catterall, 2009, 2015; Dunn, Bundy & Stinson, 2015; Dunn & Stinson, 2012; O'Mara, 2004).

**"Reading a story is one thing, but going through what the character feels like is another thing and I think that these drama lessons helped support this fact."**

Santiago, student

## CONCLUSION

This is the first time an in-depth cross-case analysis exploring student learning has been conducted on the School Drama program. This research has captured pre- and post-program student data across a range of skills, dispositions and capabilities in three different school contexts. Strong evidence emerges about the impact that School Drama has on student engagement; student confidence; student empathy; connection to character and perspective taking; as well as student imagination and creativity alongside selected English and literacy outcomes.

As School Drama engages the whole student in the process, it is valuable to look beyond purely academic outcomes, to consider the impacts on students within a holistic learning framework.

If we truly want a future world where our citizens are compassionate, confident, deeply literate, who can harness their imagination and creativity to think in divergent and flexible ways, then we must invest in quality Arts experiences and programs in schools.

Find out how you can get involved in School Drama at [sydneytheatre.com.au/schooldrama](https://sydneytheatre.com.au/schooldrama)

For more research on School Drama, head to [sydneytheatre.com.au/schooldramaresearch](https://sydneytheatre.com.au/schooldramaresearch)

**“The arts, it has been said, cannot change the world, but they may change human beings who might change the world.”**

**Maxine Greene\***