“If your body's not really moving, your brain's not really going”

Process Drama, Literacy and the Middle Years

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Abstract

Much research and writing has occurred over the last decade into the education of boys, with particular attention paid to the discrepancy in literacy levels when compared with girls. Research shows that the Middle Years of schooling are a major transitional time of adjustment; when literacy levels, particularly of boys, tend to plateau. The difference in literacy and engagement levels in English classes of boys and girls also tends to become wider, with more boys being at a lower percentile. This action research project, in a Year 7 English class, implemented Process drama strategies to engage students in their literacy learning. Analysis of a range of data, including writing samples demonstrated increased engagement during English classes and some improvement in literacy skills.
This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) the thesis is 22,645 words in length, inclusive of footnotes, but exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices
Abstract

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Introduction

In our society, oral and written literacy is an essential skill for success in moving through the primary and secondary school years, and on into further education, study and the workforce.

The impetus for this research comes from within my own family. I have four children, two daughters and two sons. All were read stories from babyhood; all grew up in a family where literacy and oracy was an important and constant part of daily life. In our family the factors of race or low socio-economic status do not apply negatively. The eldest, a girl, won a regional writing competition; the youngest, a girl, never stops talking, reading or writing stories. One of the boys has been through a reading recovery program. The other, when in year 8, had a class novel he enjoyed reading destroyed by pages of basic, written comprehension work and barely tolerates school subjects without a practical application. Why is it that many boys struggle? Is it the nature of boys? Is it the teaching? Is it the content? Is it the school structure? What other factors come into play?

My background is that of a primary teacher who majored in the Arts. As a Music/Drama specialist I have seen the positive effects that Process Drama can have on students, their empathy with the roles and issues, their engagement in activities, their ability to think and write critically about issues raised. After reading some of the large body of literature and research devoted to the education of boys, I feel that the use of more active learning opportunities, such as Process Drama, might lead to a higher level of engagement and thus a higher level of skills acquisition in literacy classes. However, the assumption that higher levels of engagement lead to a greater acquisition of skills is a generalization that requires further discussion and research.
As the move to secondary schooling in this country tends to signal an important transition in the way students experience learning, a time when they are expected to decipher and produce a greater volume and range of writing with less teacher direction and skills instruction, I decided to conduct my research in the later middle years area. This age group, adolescence, also experiences change in many other areas including physical and social, making this a challenging time where schoolwork may not be seen as a high priority by the students, a time where ‘peer esteem’ (Lillico, 2008) increasingly has an effect on their behaviour and learning. Adolescence can be a “…period of trauma or peace, rebellion or conformity, it is clearly a time of change in the perception of self and ‘other’, sexuality and relationships” (Hatton & Anderson, 2004, p. 111). Green’s case study (1998) into the transition from primary to secondary school finds that peer acceptance is an important factor affecting behaviour in class, even for academically strong students. In cases of disruptive behaviour she reports that the student “felt compelled to join in rather than risk being ostracised” (Green, 1998, p. 5).

Although much research has been conducted into the use of Process Drama and drama strategies in literacy, the greater proportion has been in the early years. I have not found any studies looking at the effect of process drama on boys’ literacy when used in the transition to the early secondary years. O’Mara, who has worked with Process Drama and literacy in the middle years, describes the use of Process Drama to illustrate the engagement of all students with this strategy, and the complexity of investigation and thinking possible (O’Mara, 2003). Her extensive work in this area has not, however, specifically targeted boys and the gender gap in literacy, which seems to peak at this stage of their education. In looking at this transition through the middle years of the education process, the Hundred Schools research project documented the plateau in literacy skills at this stage and the widening gap between boys and girls (Rowe, 1995).
My study seeks to investigate whether middle years boys, who are often disengaged in English classes at this level (Culican, Emmitt, & Oakley, 2001), will show a greater involvement in their classes through Process drama and a subsequent improvement in their writing skills. Of course, the same strategies are likely to work for girls as well, and, while this study is concentrating on boys, there is a subsidiary interest in whether they will also benefit the girls in a coeducational class. The key research question being investigated is:

- Can Process Drama increase the literacy skills of middle years boys and if so how?

Associated questions are:

- Can Process Drama in middle years English classes lead to greater engagement of boys in literacy learning?
- Can greater engagement in English classes as a result of the use of Process Drama result in evidence of an improvement in literacy skills in written and oral language?
- Will the use of Process Drama in this co-educational English class also result in improved engagement and literacy skills for the girls?

In this action research study, as reflective practitioner, I taught a Year 7 co-educational English class for a six week period using Process drama techniques. The sessions incorporated active learning practices where writing was an integral part of the process.
Literature Review

The literature review for this research study was conducted as a search for writings on the topics: boys, literacy, middle years, transition and Process Drama (and all combinations of these search terms). This was synthesised into a review of: research on the transitional process during middle years; research conducted over the last decade on middle years boys and literacy levels; studies documenting the use of Process Drama in developing literacy skills; and how the elements of drama pedagogy apply in the teaching of middle years boys. This chapter details previous research findings, primarily Australian studies with some reference to relevant international research, relevant to this study grouped under the following headings: Transition; Middle Years, Boys and Literacy; Literacy and Process Drama; Engaging Boys through Process Drama.

Transition

Throughout the 1990’s and into the early 2000’s, extensive research has occurred on the middle years of schooling, since it was recognised both in Australia and internationally, that this was a pivotal transitional period in students’ lives. Rivalland and Wooller, when investigating writing in upper primary classes, pinpoint the importance of this period:

The transition period from primary school to secondary school – years 6, 7 and 8 – were highlighted by the Australian Language and Literacy Policy Report as being one of the two critical periods in literacy development (the other being the first three years of school) (2006, p. 18).
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During this transition there is a shift from literacy blocks of learning consisting of two hours per day in primary school, to Year 7 where students are expected to cope with more abstract and complex language and ideas in a single 40-50 minute period. When examining middle school reform at a high school in Australian state schooling systems Smyth et al. stated the need to:

…honestly acknowledge the reality that the way schooling is conventionally perceived and organised does not work for increasingly large numbers of adolescents, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Smyth, McInerney, & Hattam, 2003, p. 178).

In Australia we have produced reports on a large number of projects on the middle years, among which are: Junior Secondary Review (Eyers, Cormack, & Barratt, 1992; Hudson, 2001); In the Middle: Schooling for Adolescents (Berkeley, 1994); From Alienation to Engagement (Cormack & Cumming, 1996); Teachers Working with Young Adolescents (Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, 1996); The National Middle Schooling Project (Cumming & Barratt, 1998); Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) Project (Hill & Russell, 1999); The Successful Interventions Literacy Research Project, Middle years 5-9 (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2001) and The Middle Years Literacy Research Project (Culican et al., 2001; Komesaroff & Morrison, 2001). These publications focused on a range of factors affecting adolescent learning from Grade 5 through to year 9. The Australian research has focused on the developmental needs of adolescents, looking at such diverse issues as alienation, drugs and alcohol, youth identity, sexuality and gender issues, suicide, literacy and numeracy, integrated curriculum, technology, professional development, multimodal literacies, teacher/student relationships and power issues. Despite such a large body of research and discussion, the reforms necessary to address these issues and create change in pedagogy in the middle years have been slow to occur in most schools.
A Victorian Government publication entitled “The Middle Years A Guide for Strategic Action 5-9” summarises the challenge facing schools teaching middle years students:

> While most students find the middle years of schooling a productive time for responding to new challenges and developing their learning, a significant number of others (particularly boys) find little enjoyment in a period that for them is characterised by frustration and generally negative attitudes to learning. These students are likely to be among the approximately 30 per cent of those who do not remain at school to complete Year 12. Very often these low achieving, ‘at risk’ students lack self-esteem and confidence, characteristics often evident in those with poor literacy skills (Department of Education Employment and Training Victoria, 1999, p. 11).

This raises the alternative question of whether the low self-esteem and confidence is because of low-level literacy skills and lack of success at school or vice versa? Is this due to a lack of progress in primary school or a regression at secondary school? The answer probably can be all/any/a combination of the above, depending on the individual student.

A report commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, Beyond the Middle (Luke et al., 2003) addresses the issue of practicable, sustainable change in middle years education:

> Our findings strongly suggest that the focus on middle years to date has been largely ‘first generation’ work concentrated on advocacy and development, with some serious definitional limitations and unfinished business (p.4).

This report, focusing on literacy and numeracy policies in the middle years of schooling, found that although some programs had made improvements in the levels of attainment of the most disadvantaged students, they were administered in a fragmentary rather than systemic way, resulting in a lack of sustainability of practice.
In concluding their study they found that further important work in this area remains to be done.

…such a move in policy and practice will require another wave, another generation of middle years research, policy and development. Without further professional and policy debate, substantial system attention and investment – there is a danger that the reforms described here will remain ‘stuck in the middle’ (Luke et al., 2003, p. 135).

A study of the literacy levels of students in the middle years has found that reading and writing tends to plateau, with “a dip in the rate of progress of students in the first year (Year 7) of secondary school” (Hill, Holmes-Smith, & Rowe, 1993, p. 9). Findings from the Victorian Quality schooling Project in relation to literacy were that:

… students make the most progress in learning during the early years and the least progress during the early adolescent years; the gap between the top and bottom 10 per cent of students grows rapidly; transition problems (primary to secondary) are most severe for low-achieving students; and there is a significant underachievement problem among young adolescent boys (Hill & Crevola, 1997).
The following diagram is taken from a research project, *Hundred Schools Project: Literacy Programs Study* (Rowe, 1995), and shows the flattening out of reading literacy levels at Year 7, and the clear distinction in the reading levels of boys and girls in these later middle years. Each year level displays the results of the middle 50% (the rectangular boxes), the average for the top and bottom 10% (the lines extending up and down) and the trend based on their end of Year Prep results (the dotted lines).

Other studies have focused on the differences in classroom literacy learning between Year 6 and 7 as a way to analyse the reasons for this lack of achievement in the transition years. Cairney, Lowe and Sproats (1994), found the differing approaches in literacy practices between year 6 & year 7 included less reading for pleasure, less access to varied reading materials and less opportunity for extended writing. Green’s case study found, in addition, the segmentation of literacy responsibility to the English class resulted in lower literacy practices in other subjects such as Science.
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(Green, 1998). Green suggested from her research that further communication between primary and secondary teachers was essential to a successful transition to Year 7 and that schools should:

Ensure that the writing and the reading demands on students in their first year of secondary school extend those experienced in primary school. Students need opportunity to engage in meaningful literacy practices involving active writing and reading in which meaning is constructed for real purposes. This will enable students to be active rather than passive, and to find opportunity to control their writing and reading. Student attitudes to, and habits in, writing and reading may then improve, rather than deteriorate, in the transition from primary to secondary school (p.127).

Cairney suggests that schools ‘mark time’ during this transition period to Year 7 to allow students time to adjust, but in fact are not providing enough challenge for the students to move forward (Cairney, Buchanan, Sproats, & Lowe, 1998). A study by van de Gaer investigated gender differences in language development and found that girls showed a positive learning gain across secondary school, whereas boys started secondary school with a decline in both effort and attitude followed by an acceleration. This study also found:

…evidence for a positive longitudinal association between language achievement and school engagement, meaning that students who showed a smaller decline in school engagement also showed more learning gains in language. Moreover, only for boys were the engagement starting levels related to their learning rates in language (van de Gaer, 2009, abstract).

It would appear that there is a more direct correlation between engagement and achievement in language classes, especially at the transitional stage, for boys.

The importance of providing engaging, authentic literacy practices is, from my experience, well established in primary schools. Without the constraints of subject timetabling prevalent in secondary schools, primary schools are able to spend extended periods of time in developing the students’ interests through such
approaches as Inquiry learning. In focusing on one class of students, teachers are able to get to know their students well and thus provide learning experiences that extend them as well as catering to individual differences. In secondary school, where there is specialization of subjects, the teachers may only see the students for two or three subjects at most, and with timetabling constraints, mostly for only 40-50 minute periods. In my study the Year 7 teacher taught this class for English and Humanities and was also their homeroom teacher. All four of their English classes were single periods.

Relationships with teachers have been seen to be crucial to a successful transition to secondary school. A recent research project investigating enhancing wellbeing and learning in the middle years states:

This research project recognizes that strong, caring and positive teacher student relationships are critical to student engagement in Middle Years classrooms (Frydenberg et al., 2008, project summary).

One of the findings of the Victorian Quality Schools Project (Hill et al., 1993) supports the importance of teachers in this transitional period. The Catholic Education Office, in its *Vision for Teaching and Learning* conclude:

…that a teacher’s attitude to his or her work and the quality of the teaching provided by the teacher directly impacted on student availability for learning and student learning outcomes. This research highlighted for the teaching profession the now well accepted premise that the teacher is the most significant variable in the achievement of quality learning outcomes for all students (Punton, 2006, p. 2).

To state that the teacher is ‘the’ most important factor in quality learning outcomes is perhaps simplifying too much the complexity of learning and teaching in our schools. Certainly the teacher in the classroom is ‘one’ of the most important. The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, drawing on the extensive body of research from the last decade both in Australia and overseas, has adopted an ‘Effective Schools Model’ which outlines all of the areas essential to
effective literacy outcomes for students (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009). These include a stimulating and secure learning environment, and purposeful teaching, both elements in which the teacher/student relationship is paramount. Another study, *Addressing the Educational Needs of Boys* (Lingard, Martino, Mills, & Bahr, 2002), reiterates the fundamental place of the teacher-student relationship.

The importance of developing a relationship with the students was flagged as central to effective learning and enhancing educational outcomes for boys… the attention is on the teacher having as much contact with the same class or group of students so that a positive relationship based on knowing the students can be developed. All the teachers interviewed reiterated the importance of developing relationships with the boys as a key to improving the educational outcomes for boys (Lingard et al., 2002, p. 47).

A major report of the *Middle Years Literacy Research Project* in 2001 concluded:

Learners in early adolescence have different developmental, social and cognitive needs from students in other phases of schooling. Recent research into student attitudes and performance is indicative of significant levels of disenchantment and alienation among adolescent learners (Cormack & Cumming, 1996; Fuller, 1998). Therefore, the need to engage students in learning is a key recommendation emerging from major research into middle years reform (Culican et al., 2001, p. 12)

Secondary English classes differ from primary literacy classes in that the students are expected to make the shift from reading and writing as a skill to be learnt, to reading and writing for learning. Research in the early 2000’s pinpointed the importance of success during the middle years transition, which quite often determined students’ ability to go on to successful study in the later secondary school years and tertiary education.
Schooling in the middle years challenges students to develop control of the literacy demands and learning expectations of increasingly sophisticated and specialised areas of knowledge represented in the curriculum. As knowledge becomes more specialised in these areas, so too the literacies associated with the ways this knowledge is constructed and represented becomes more complex. Supporting middle years students to develop the literacy knowledge, skills and capabilities required for meaningful participation in academic, social and community life, requires not only an understanding of the literacy needs of these students but also an understanding of the needs and nature of young adolescents and the implications of this on how students learn (Culican, Milburn, & Oakley, 2006, p. 16).

In Australia, at federal education departmental level, research into and recognition of literacy in the middle years has resulted in various programs and resources for schools and teachers, such as those available on the MyRead website (Department of Education Science and Training, 2002). Perhaps this upward shift in literacy requirements also needs to be made more explicit to those new secondary students, especially boys, undergoing/undertaking this learning, as well as their parents who will be supporting them at home. The secondary curriculum of English, along with all other subject areas, needs to continue to develop the literacy skills required to de-code and analyse information in texts of multiple types. This will require a multiplicity of approaches so as to cater to the wide range of students in most secondary classes of both genders. A research project carried out by the University of West Sydney in 2004/5 looking at the motivation and engagement of boys in schools, particularly those from Indigenous, low socio-economic or rural/isolated groups, discussed the need to cater for individual boys’ needs rather than treating them as an homogeneous group:

Although more boys than girls have difficulty with literacy and this gap increases as they move into secondary schooling, it has also been found that there is a range of levels among boys as a group. Most studies agree that developing productive pedagogies that engage boys are essential to an improvement in learning (Munns, Arthur et al., 2006, p. 16).
I would argue that truly catering to the individual literacy learning needs and modes of each boy will, in the process, result in increased motivation and engagement.

The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) English Domain outlines procedures for classroom teaching clearly in its documentation, and appears to exhort the type of groupings typically seen in primary literacy classes:

The English program should be structured to provide many opportunities for pair, small-group and whole-class discussions; for listening to others, including peers, the teacher and other adults; for making individual and group presentations to different audiences; and for receiving feedback on their work. These interactions provide the contexts for learning how to adjust speech and writing to meet the needs of audiences and different contexts (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2007).

In Grade 6 there tends to be more integration of literacy skills, with teachers able to develop units of inquiry in which students use language on authentic tasks, many planned or conceived by the students themselves. In primary school there is also often a wider range of pedagogies and strategies incorporated into the inquiry literacy process, flexible and diverse work groupings, often incorporating peer tutoring at a range of levels and configurations. All of these strategies are ones which have been shown to engage and motivate boys in their learning. Conversely the move to secondary school English is more often than not a move to a desk in which you sit for 40-50 minutes in a largely teacher directed class (Cairney et al., 1998).

During 2003, a research project investigated ‘scaffolding literacy’ through a specified ‘top down’ format of learning. This process has since been developed further into the program called ‘Learning to Read: Reading to Learn’ and used in the *Middle Years Literacy Project* (Culican et al., 2006). The research data indicated significant gains in reading comprehension and other literacy skills and an improved attitude of the ‘at-risk’ students involved (p. 35) Qualitative data also indicated that it helped students of higher ability as well (p. 38). Although a very productive pedagogy, this approach to scaffolding literacy is still largely teacher directed, and one teacher stated she would not use it continuously as “they would get sick of it” (Culican et al., 2006, p. 24). It is,
however an improvement on the approach often adopted by teachers experiencing
discipline issues with their middle years class as described in Green’s (1998) study: …“to teach in ways that are very easy to discipline” a “‘teacher-centred, blackboard-
centred, handout-centred’ approach was the consequence of such a decision” (p.124)

Current literacy interventions for students struggling to cope with the demands of
learning in the middle years generally, in secondary schooling, take the form of
withdrawals into ‘special’ literacy classes. The school in my research study called this
‘Foundation English’, where students participate for one period a week in a program
that uses games and puzzles initially, in combination with guided reading, reciprocal
reading, individual skills workbook and scaffolding of assignment tasks from the
regular English class. The classes are adjusted to provide for the individual learning
needs of the participants. The teacher of this class is scheduled to participate in
professional development for the ‘Learning to Read, Reading to Learn’ program this
year.

It seems that although many different literacy strategies have been, and still are, being
trialed with ‘at-risk’ adolescent boys, an overall strategy for teaching literacy to boys
in the Middle Years has not yet been formulated. The transition of students from the
late primary years and childhood to the early secondary years and early adolescence
can be seen as a pivotal moment of change in the students’ life. Some students
navigate this adjustment with ease. Many, especially boys, find this a difficult and
uncertain time in their development, sometimes resulting in stagnation or backwards
movement in learning.
Middle Years, Boys and Literacy

Boys’ learning, particularly their lower literacy levels in comparison to girls, has been a focus of concern and research over the last decade. In October 2002, the Standing Committee on Education and Training tabled its report Boys: Getting it Right in the House of Representatives, Commonwealth Government of Australia. This report was the culmination of an inquiry requested in 2000 by the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs into boys’ “literacy needs and socialization skills in the early and middle years of schooling” (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002, p. xi). Recommendations covering a broad range of education issues in relation to boys’ learning included to:

promote strategies that teachers can use to more effectively engage all boys and girls by taking into account their different learning styles (p.1-2).

In the introduction to this report it is stated

The difficulty experienced by some students, particularly boys, in early literacy requires attention as it can impact adversely on the rest of their schooling. Further, the apparent decline in boys’ relative performance at secondary level requires investigation and explanation, especially as the gap in achievement between boys and girls appears to have widened significantly in the last 10 to 20 years (p.1-2).

Marks (2006, p. 101) found that at age 15, 30 per cent of boys were in the lowest quartile in reading compared to 19 per cent of girls. Further international and Australian data sources support the concern with boys’ underachievement. The higher proportion of female Australian university enrolments and graduates is cited as indicative of the poorer performance of boys in the traditional school learning system (Andresen & Woods, 2008); statistics in the US show girls outperform boys in writing and reading (Dessoff, 2005); research in England indicates a 16% gender gap in writing of 10-11 year old students (Bearne & Grainger, 2004) and research in
Scandinavia finds that boys were much more reluctant in writing tasks than girls (Merisuo-Storm, 2006).

It is from the strong base of support for boys’ education by the Commonwealth Government that funding for many Australian research projects and programs has arisen. Following on from these recommendations, *The Boys’ Education Lighthouse Schools (BELS)* Australia-wide programme was funded as ‘a school-based approach to developing and testing the effectiveness of strategies for improving learning outcomes for boys’ (Cuttance et al., 2007). This project was in response to extensive research in the last ten years, which identified a number of crucial issues in boys’ education: boys report less interest and enjoyment of schooling, boys are less engaged and more easily distracted in classes, depression and suicide are recorded at higher rates among boys than girls, school retention and entrance scores to tertiary education for boys are lower.

The BELS project was based on individual case studies in which literacy was a focus for 27% of the cluster schools, with a major emphasis on pedagogy and literacy. Engagement, self-esteem and role models were other areas targeted. The results of one school illustrate the effect a targeted literacy programme can have on both boys and girls.

The school’s Year 7 mean for boys was 18 points below the state-wide mean in 2003 and 3 points above in 2004, the year in which the SPARKS programme was being trialled. The impact of the programme is clear in the 2005 results for the school — the Year 7 average for boys in the Writing assessment had improved to 60 points above the state-wide average for boys – which was the same as the Queensland average for girls. Girls at the school, however, had increased their mean score to 57 points above the mean for girls state-wide. Twenty-one students (8 of them boys) scored at the possible maximum level of 900 points. This was the best Year 7 result that the school had ever achieved (Cuttance et al 2007, p. 46).

This project combined teacher professional development, a mentoring program and the development of specific literacy strategies in order to improve literacy.
performance. The data from this project shows that boys’ literacy can progress as a result of a clear, focused program. The BELS project and the data collected during the process has led to a further program ‘Success for Boys’ currently being implemented in many schools through professional development of teachers. This program targets effective literacy teaching, ICT as active learning, mentoring and support for Indigenous boys.

Boys’ education cannot be discussed without some reference to the research and writings on the issue of masculinity and how perceptions of masculinity affect the learning of boys. Dr Wayne Martino has conducted research in Australia, Canada and South Africa. Addressing the Educational Needs of Boys – Strategies for Schools and Teachers research project was commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (Lingard et al., 2002). The project involved an extensive literature review and research in 19 primary and secondary schools across four Australian states – New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia. This research project identified the issues of boys’ engagement in school and found differences between the way in which boys and girls experienced schooling.

…the issue of boys in education is a complex one, requiring a multi-faceted approach. The research has strongly supported the need to move beyond a ‘tips for teachers’ approach in addressing the educational needs of boys. What is required is the bringing together of sophisticated research-based knowledge with deep knowledge of the best teaching practices (p. 7).

Martino has written and researched extensively into the complexity and importance of catering to boys’ needs as individuals. He states

The consequence of attributing boys' failure at literacy to the feminization of schooling and the curriculum, we argue, has resulted in advocating specific strategies to address this problem that ignore the impact of race relations, economic disadvantage, ethnicity, sexuality, geographical location, and other factors in terms of their capacity to impact on school performance (Martino & Kehler, 2007, p. 406).
Martino’s *Boys Stuff* (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2001) gives a boys’ perspective on issues that concern them in relation to school, peers and family and further articles highlight the masculinity issue in relation to how boys relate to English as a ‘feminine’ subject (Greig & Hughes, 2009; Martino, 2005). In earlier years as a simplistic response to the masculinity issue, the *Junior Secondary Review* advocated more male teachers would resolve this (Eyers et al., 1992).

As further writing and research on the issue of stereotypical versions of masculinity and their effect on the school performance of boys have been produced, the complexity of the factors involved has become obvious. Keddie and Mills in their case studies also found that the factors of ethnicity, indigeneity and socio-economic factors as well as understandings of masculinity/femininity may also influence boys’ achievement levels. Their study is centered on interviews and observations of teachers in many different school settings who display effective pedagogies in their teaching. They found that the successful pedagogies involved one or a combination of: a democratic classroom based on social justice, an encouragement to take risks, participating in meaningful work, connectedness, both within and outside school, being given a voice and the valuing of difference (race, religion, masculinities) (Keddie & Mills, 2007).

Alloway has been extremely prolific in writing and researching in the area of boys’ education (Alloway, 2007) and the underachievement of boys in literacy learning (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002). The final recommendation of the *Boys, Literacy and Schooling* study (Alloway, Freebody et al. 2002) was that future research in the area of boys and literacy should address the need for strategies that effectively enabled boys to develop “repertoires for (re)presenting self: repertoires for relating; repertoires for engaging with and negotiating cultural knowledge and meaning…” (p. 211). Various other writers have examined the use of sport, multimodal texts, rap, inquiry based learning or multi-literacies in the teaching of literacy to boys.
Martino and Kehler (2007) summarise the way forward in the on-going debate.

…we write this article in the spirit of encouraging further debate and dialogue about the need to engage with research-based literature about pedagogical reform, as well as that which addresses the impact of masculinities on boys' experiences of schooling, and explicitly their engagement with literacy. This knowledge, combined with an understanding about the limitations of essentialist mindsets, we believe, has the potential to assist educators in developing pedagogical interventions that will result in expanding boys' repertoires of practice, with the view to improving their literacy outcomes (p. 406).

An article in The Sydney Morning Herald by Greg Andresen of Men’s Health Australia and Michael Woods of the University of Western Sydney concludes

Given that the academic outcomes for girls were turned around in less than 10 years it is worrying that 15 years after the first report on boy’s education, the situation for boys is deteriorating. This suggests that efforts to improve educational outcomes for boys to date have been either misguided or poorly implemented. It is high time we started to fix the education systems that are failing our boys and young men so badly (Andresen and Woods, 2008, p. 2).

Of course, being a short article in a daily newspaper means the authors do not give any complex answers to this obviously complex issue. However the way forward may lie in the following statement from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training. “Traditional primary and secondary schooling tends to favour passive learning to the detriment of those students who prefer interactive and experiential learning styles” (2002:xviii).

As a part time Literacy Project Officer in a rural Queensland High School, Lennon used local data to motivate staff to look at their own practices (Lennon, 2009, p. 48). The underperformance of the middle years’ boys in their school prompted these teachers to work in teams to develop units of work based on the latest research on boys’ literacy education. However, further research is required to encourage and
guide teachers in taking the step towards implementing more appropriate forms of learning within their classrooms for male students. This has been recognized by Lennon as she begins a PhD prompted by her attempts to “instigate a locally focused, comprehensive and multi pronged approach to addressing the increasingly Western phenomenon of underperforming and disengaged boys in the middle years of schooling” (p.46).

**Literacy and Process Drama**

...achievement in secondary school is measured through the capacity of students to write effectively and this plays a major role in deciding who is successful or not in secondary schools...(Rivalland and Wooller, 2006, p. 27).

Literacy in the contemporary classroom is a much wider field than the in traditional classroom, incorporating not only technical skills but a wide range of social interactions, some of which, such as new technologies, our students are much more proficient in than their teachers. In a broad sense, literacy is the ability to derive and communicate meaning using symbols. These symbols can be in a visual or oral form. Luke and Freebody (2000) define literacy as:

…the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print and multimedia (p.9).

In order to engage adolescent learners in English classes, especially boys who make up the bulk of low level achievers in this skill area, it appears necessary to incorporate a varied range of productive pedagogies that cater to their individual needs. Many middle years research projects have investigated the factors related to productive pedagogies (those that engage students and result in sustained learning), including the use of ICT in various forms and the study of film as text and other multiliteracies (print, visual and digital texts), all of which are being integrated more regularly into classroom practice. For example, ‘Critical minds’ is a project incorporating many of these facets into a project with a group of Year 9 Low literacy students (Morrell,
A productive pedagogy, which I have used successfully at all levels and in all content areas of primary schooling, is Process Drama. Cecily O’Neill describes Process Drama as:

… a complex dramatic encounter [which] evokes an immediate dramatic world bounded in space and time, a world that depends on the consensus of all those present for its existence. Process Drama proceeds without a script. Its outcome is unpredictable, it lacks a separate audience, and the experience is impossible to replicate exactly (in Schneider, Crumpler, & Rogers, 2006, p. xiii)

Process drama evolved from the ‘creative dramatics’ (USA) and ‘dramatic play’ (UK) of the 1930’s – 1950’s (O’Toole, Stinson, & Moore, 2009). This evolved into the developmental drama espoused by Brian Way (Way, 1967). An alternative movement developing at this time was drama in education, led by Dorothy Heathcote in the UK, from where it has spread throughout the world, aided by exponents such as Gavin Bolton and Cecily O’Neill (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; O’Neill, 1995). Later writers have written convincingly of the benefits and practices of educational drama (Booth, 2005; Bowell & Heap, 2001; Dickinson & Neelands, 2006; Miller & Saxton, 2004) and in Australia a leading proponent is John O’Toole who has authored and co-authored many writings, the latest of which is Drama and the Curriculum with Madonna Stinson and Tiina Moore (O’Toole, Stinson et al, 2009). However it is Dorothy Heathcote who is the doyenne of Process Drama. It is she who has pioneered and cemented a place for Process Drama as a productive pedagogy at all levels and in all subjects, primarily through her own indefatigable demonstrations, teaching and writings. Bowell and Heap describe how Process Drama is a participatory form of learning, a form of joint construction theatre with no audience:

Process Drama is a form of theatre applied within an educational context in which learners, in collaboration with the teacher, create dramas for exploration, expression and learning (2005:60).
Within the Process Drama framework students are given a determining role, an active part in creating the work that occurs, which enables them to be both empowered and totally engaged in the process. The drama becomes an authentic experience through the knowing participation of the students, process drama creates tension through the ability to inhabit two worlds, that of the student in the classroom and that of the role they occupy. One of the most effective structures of Process Drama is the use of Teacher-in-role, where the teacher is participating in the drama alongside the students, rather than being the dictator. Aitken describes this as ‘relational pedagogy’ which:

…occurs when teachers work alongside children to explore where learning may go rather than teachers determining where it will go. This openness enables children to participate more fully and actively construct knowledge through engagement with their teachers, their peers, and the real and imagined worlds of drama (Aitken, Fraser, & Price, 2007, p. 16).

Most programs and research into the use of Process Drama in literacy classes has been in the early years and primary classrooms. Martello is one educator who has written extensively on the use of drama in early years literacy (Martello, 2004, 2005). She found drama strategies to be an invaluable method in spoken, written and visual multiliteracies.

The need to use language, images, gestures and sounds to communicate meanings is embedded in drama situations in as much variety as in life. …As students make choices to create their own narratives in drama they can be helped to understand the constructedness of text and the value in questioning texts that others create (2004, p. 28).

Through Process Drama, students experience using language in a variety of situations, both within and outside their normal sphere. In many instances this active practice in the use of language can be used to help students, through reflective practices, to develop a deeper understanding of language and how it is used in our society. With drama’s inherent ability to develop literacy further, Martello advocates the “…reconceptualising of literacy pedagogy in early childhood education, with an emphasis on the use of drama pedagogy” (2005, author abstract).
In a collaboration between UK and Australian researchers, Bunyan collates experiences of Process drama with 10-12 year olds and finds that

Planned drama approaches, which develop pupil’s critical analysis and creativity move them from a superficial response to texts and situations to a more sophisticated ability to think critically (Bunyan, Moore, & Donelan, 2003, p. 29).

The Primary English Teaching Association (PETA) in Australia publication, *Text Next* (Healy & Honan, 2004), has brought together a range of classroom examples and case studies on using the Four Resources model in literacy teaching. The Four Resources Model was proposed by Luke and Freebody as a ‘family of practices’ and the four roles they designated as needed by students for literacy success were: code breaker, meaning maker, text user and text critic (Luke & Freebody, 1999a). In a chapter of *Text Next* O’Mara, currently a senior lecturer at the School of Education, Deakin University and a drama and literacy specialist, describes her case study approach using Process drama and the four Resources Model with a grade 5 class. This chapter records how, through engaging in process drama sessions, the students de-code and make meaning of the situation, essential skills in literacy success. Through using and experiencing gesture and voice in different situations, the students are able to “break and form social and linguistic codes” (O’Mara, 2004, pp., abstract). In another article, O’Mara, in detailing an English session with a Year 7 class, illustrates clearly the potency of Process Drama as a teaching pedagogy in classrooms when:

Students find dramatic problem solving engaging, and drama can be used in English to explore literature, themes, as an impetus for writing, to promote creative thinking and to help students engage with multiple issues (2003, p. 73).

Hertzberg, a lecturer in Drama and ESL, has researched extensively the use of drama in educational settings (Hertzberg, 1998, 2004). In fact, it was reading a report of one of her earlier research projects that began my personal investigation into the use of drama beyond the specialist class, to improve literacy skills. A recent paper
(Hertzberg, 2004) records a research project with year 5 ESL learners using the students’ own voices to record how and why they learn. The various data collected were analyzed and coded against the NSW Quality Teaching Model of Pedagogy. The students demonstrated many aspects of higher order thinking and critical and reflective talk during the sessions. An important aspect of literacy de-coding is the student’s ability to make connections to self, other texts and the world. Process Drama has been shown to be an effective vehicle in facilitating the development of this skill in making connections between texts, self and the various constructions of reality possible in process drama (Martello, 2004, p. 26).

An important component of the English curriculum is the development of speaking and listening skills. The secondary English classroom needs to provide structures where students are able to participate in activities that actively encourage talk, essential not only to boys’ learning but all students’ learning. The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) programme states in the ‘Creating Texts’ section of the English Domain that:

They [students] participate, through speaking and listening, in different oral situations; classroom programs should be planned to include many opportunities for students to actively engage in speaking and listening … and to learn to compose and interpret many different kinds of oral texts, including discussions, stories, debates, speeches and dramatic presentations (VCAA, 2007).

The VELS curriculum statement on Classroom interactions specifies the necessity of providing opportunities for student communication within the Literacy classroom: “Many of the skills that students develop, especially in speaking and listening, involve students in interactions with others…Talk is central to English” (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), 2007). It would be interesting to chart the oral literacy in a ‘typical’ Middle Years English classroom over a period of time to ascertain how much oral language students actually do actively participate in. Perhaps the VELS statements need to be more specific in quantifying student talk, as many English classrooms seem to be more dominated by teacher talk. Conversely,
Process Drama, Literacy and the Middle Years

Process Drama is a pedagogy which provides multiple opportunities for reciprocal verbal communication student/student and student/teacher.

Drama has always been recognized as an ideal form for the development of oral language. O’Toole and Stinson give a sweeping history of the use of drama in language learning, starting with a 1905 handbook of teaching (2009, p. 2) through to the present state of the art. In the 1960’s Barnes edited Drama in the English Classroom (Barnes, 1968) in which is stated the importance of oral language:

The intellectual development of a child may well depend not so much upon what has been presented to him in formal instruction, but upon the dialogues in which he has taken an active part (cited in O’Toole, 2009, p. 55).

In 1975 the Bullock report, a survey of the teaching of English in 2000 British schools is quoted as stating:

Drama has an obvious and substantial contribution to make to the development of children’s language and its possibilities in this respect have yet to be fully explored (cited in O’Toole, 2009, p. 57).

Immersion in and the exploration of verbal language during drama lead naturally into written language. When directly related to experiential learning, the writing is directly related to an authentic experience in which the students have a stake, in which they are engaged. The rich experience of being in the drama has been found to directly transfer to young children’s writing: “In writing development, children who experience drama also appear to be more capable of making appropriate linguistic choices as well as expressing opinions or suggesting solutions” (McNaughton, 1997).

The VELS statements in the English Domain, Level 5 (Year 7 and 8) includes the need for students to be able to:

…explore the power of language and the ways it can influence roles and relationships and represent ideas, information and concepts. They learn that texts can be created for multiple purposes (VCAA, 2008, p. 23).
I would suggest that process drama is an ideal medium in which to develop these concepts as well as applying the skills of writing. Bamford (2006) has published a research project, which analyses the effect of ‘arts-rich programmes’ in a global context. Her results support the case for a stronger arts focus in schools.

Arts education increases co-operation, respect, responsibility, tolerance, and appreciation, and has a positive effect on the development of social and cultural understanding. One of the reasons for this could be that arts-rich programmes appear to encourage more focused classroom interactions and more consistent school attendance—especially in boys and marginalised (at-risk) students (p. 144).

All of the research studying the literacy problems of boys in the middle years has pointed to the need for pedagogies which engage through interaction. White and Smerdon (White & Smerdon, 2008) discuss the difficulties of creating creative classrooms with the prevailing bureaucracy and political agendas. They describe a ‘Creativity and pedagogy’ project at North Fitzroy Primary School, Victoria, which is empowering teachers to be more creative in their teaching practice. Unfortunately this kind of project is in the minority. They conclude:

The flexible thinking, risk-taking, looking anew and inherent freedoms that we suggest characterise the democratic and inclusive form of creativity to be encouraged in classrooms might be enhanced if these general pedagogical practices were more commonplace (p.104).

Although educators have been writing for over twenty years on the benefits of a creative curriculum, implementation of an arts focused curriculum is very slow in happening, especially in the secondary school systems, becoming bogged down by political wrangling and antiquated educational pedagogy.
O’Toole and Stinson (2009) deplore the school constitution that works against the realisation of this.

…although the ideals, principles and rhetoric of the ‘new’ curriculum theories have been overwhelmingly adopted by the administrators and the teachers, the structures of schooling, and the constructions of knowledge into ‘disciplines’, ‘subject areas’, timetables and assessment schemes that underpin them are still designed for the one-way transmission of content and skills ‘belonging’ to those subject areas (p. 42-43).

Many teachers underestimate the importance of ‘fun’ in learning. Zinn (2008) in his research investigating students’ lack of interest in learning at school, collected data relating to the simple question: *When was learning fun for you?* From his samples and further reading he developed the acronym for the word

CREATE:
- Choice
- Relevance
- Engagement
- Active Learning
- Teacher Attitude
- Eiredaramac (Camaraderie reversed) (p.155)

He found that fun in learning and therefore connecting students in their learning is about the …”satisfaction that comes from serious immersion in meaningful educational and intellectual experiences that empower students as successful learners and connect school to their hopes and dreams for their lives” (p.154)

I would argue that within the confines of the current strictures evident in many schools and classrooms, teachers are able to teach in a more creative way if they have the skills and confidence to do so, and the will to work at changing the prevailing ethos of the school. I would further argue that the way for change to come about must be from within as well as at the departmental level. Creating change is very much reliant on building up supportive networks and taking it step by step. If teachers were
aware of, and confident in using Process Drama, it has the capacity to facilitate an ‘arts-rich’, engaging and very productive literacy curriculum.

In Canada, the English curriculum consists of six strands of learning, one of which is Representing. Drama is included as part of this strand. In a Canadian study, McPhail conducted research for her MEd on the use of drama as part of the stream of Representing and found that: “The data showed that drama is more than just a small part of representing as it connects the six language arts and plays a significant role in literacy (K. L. McPhail, 2005, author abstract).

Another program (Brinda, 2007) uses a theatrical base to stimulate students’ interest in reading. This program incorporates facets of Process Drama in preparing students for a theatre performance. This is a very effective ‘pre-reading’ technique for reluctant adolescent readers. As the conclusion states “Creating and providing student-centred, collaborative, social-oriented, arts-based programs which engage, entertain, empower and enhance the students’ self-confidence can reap great rewards” (p.43).

While students can read accounts of a variety of life events or situations, they can be given more powerful vicarious experiences in removed locations of time & space through the employment of Process Drama strategies. It is through such authentic experiences that writing skills can be improved (Chizhik, 2009). Sæbø (2009) relates an observation study where the use of Process Drama stimulated the student led writing of a script based on bullying. Myra Barrs discusses the influence drama activities and writing in role can have on students’ linguistic capabilities, finding that it extends their language “beyond their normal range” (2000, p. 57). Process Drama, although not specifically included in the VELS English Domain curriculum, can be shown to be the ideal vehicle by which students may achieve many of the standards required at the middle years levels.

They continue to adjust their writing in response to purpose, context, and audience needs...Students work cooperatively in discussion groups, using talk to explore and analyse challenging themes and issues. They develop their skills in identifying main issues in a topic, providing supporting detail
and evidence for opinions, asking relevant clarifying questions and building on the ideas of others. They apply their knowledge of spoken texts and oral language to experiment with techniques to influence audiences, including vocabulary, rhythm, intonation, timing, pausing, body language and facial expression. They examine how situational and sociocultural factors affect audience responses and the impact of different text and sentence structures on readers and viewers (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2008, p. 23).

The research and classroom practice relating to Process Drama and literacy has illustrated the level of engagement engendered by this approach in literacy sessions, mainly in primary schools. Process Drama is by nature an active form of learning that enables students to safely explore contexts in a multilateral way. Hertzberg advocates an integrated learning approach using drama so students can “…delve beneath surface meanings and attain intellectual rigour” (2004, p. 52). Process Drama can be seen to be an ideal vehicle to encourage learning in the four knowledge processes of experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing and applying, essential elements in pedagogy for learning at all age levels (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004, p. 42).

Although Process Drama is not the only possible vehicle for providing middle years boys with the classroom activities crucial to their progress in the essential skills of English, it is one, very, powerful pedagogy available to teachers of this level. Some proponents of Process Drama, who cite instances of drama being used ‘badly’ in classrooms have stated it may be best left alone by those without the skill to use it effectively. I disagree entirely with this view, which is part of the on-going debate between the ‘drama as a stand alone subject’ and ‘drama as a methodology’ camps (O'Toole et al., 2009, pp117-118). Teachers need to practice the use of Process Drama within their classrooms if they are to become skilled users of this pedagogy. The reflective practitioner-teacher constantly trials, reviews and adjusts their teaching, often on a daily basis, when they are teaching several different classes in a secondary school. It is only by encouraging teachers to try Process Drama that we will extend its use throughout secondary schools and provide an alternative to the static teaching methods often currently employed in English classes.
As in the political arena of Australia, advocates for a back to basics or linguistic approach to English in many countries have ensured that this situation of Process Drama as ‘yet to be explored’ still remains. Despite the fact that many excellent teacher resources using drama in language contexts have been produced by drama exponents (Booth, 2005; Miller and Saxton, 2004) its use as a powerful pedagogy in classrooms is both limited and fragmented and universal implementation seems a long way off.

**Engaging Boys through Process Drama**

There have been many research studies over the last decade, focusing on boys and their learning. *Teaching Boys* (Keddie and Mills, 2007) uses evidence of successful classroom practices to show how schools can make a difference to boys’ education. In this publication there is much discussion of the perceptions of masculinity by the boys, girls, teachers, families and society in general and the influence this has on boys’ literacy and school performance in general. The authors also look at the influence of ethnicity and socio economic factors. They use the term ‘gender justice’ to highlight the importance of not treating all boys as the same and also not losing sight of the educational issues facing girls, either individually or in relationship with boys.

Many factors, which can affect boys’ literacy learning and performance, are beyond the sphere of the teacher, such as socio economic status and ethnicity. What can be modified are the strategies used by the teacher within the classroom. Unfortunately many teachers are experiencing the constraints arising from assessment deadlines, specified content and teaching to standardised testing regimes as represented by this year 8 teacher:

> Like many teachers, I went into the field of education looking for autonomy, creativity and to make a difference. After a short time in “real” classrooms, I began to lose sight of my lofty, theory-laden ideals from university. Bogged down by the routine of checking daily absentees, writing assessment criteria and filling in behaviour sheets, I laboured to cram the timetable with lessons
that would fulfil student needs come exam time. On the odd occasion that I suggested a new teaching approach to close colleagues, I would be met by a dismissive “can’t be done” or “you are only making work for yourself”. It was disheartening and it was tempting to resign myself to the “tried and true”. I had become a reluctant cog in the school machine, turning out the same assignments with the same student outcomes and the same social conditions (quoted in Luke and Freebody 2000, p. 5).

There are, however, teachers who are embracing the path to creative learning methods, as with the project at Sacred Heart Middle School, South Australia titled ‘CSI in the classroom’ (Cramond, 2006) and a unit entitled ‘Danger’ which had a direct relevance and purpose in the community (Luke and Freebody 2000, p. 4). An action research project in a primary school investigating the improvement of literacy through the creative arts states: "It could be argued that if we foster creativity we are empowering our students to interpret and truly appreciate what it means to be literate” (Crawford et al., 2008, p. 1). Increasingly, these studies are being published illustrating the importance of creativity to learning for all students, and this can be seen to be of utmost importance in boys’ literacy in the middle years. What begins as a process of guiding boys through the construction of text with a vast array of strategies in the primary school must be continued into the middle years to enable those students to fully participate in their secondary schooling, as decoding and interpreting text becomes more complex through all subject areas.

From my own experience, Process Drama is an amazingly effective pedagogy in teaching across all areas of the curriculum, with both able and struggling students. Many of the factors discussed in the research on boys failing to attain literacy levels can be incorporated successfully within the framework of Process Drama. Recent research supports this view although most research into Process Drama and literacy has been in the early years of schooling (Adomat, 2005; Crumpler & Jasinski Schneider, 2002; Grant, Hutchinson, Hornsby, & Brooke, 2008; Rieg & Paquette, 2009). Recent research conducted in the middle years of schooling has not generally targeted boys specifically but looked at drama’s effect on understanding text generally (Rosler, 2006).
In an Australian report into boys and literacy, the authors found that research into boys’ engagement with literacy activities focused on:

...boys’ reading preferences and practices; boys’ writing preferences and practices; boys’ need for additional literacy support in the classroom; and boys’ interest in electronic modes of literate practice (Alloway et al., 2002, p. 48).

A two year Canadian research study of middle years boys and literacy practices found that “…boys need to find personal interest, action, success, fun and purpose in the work they are assigned” (Blair & Sandford, 2004, p. 454). The researchers in this study found that the boys would ‘morph’ or transform literacy activities to make them more meaningful and engaging.

Engagement and motivation are two linked but separate factors influencing how and whether students learn. A study funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, *Motivation and Engagement of Boys* (Munns, Arthur et al, 2006) outlines three types of engagement critical to learning: behavioural, emotional and cognitive. These can present in both spontaneous, immediate engagement in class tasks and the longer-term engagement with schooling in general. In identifying motivation and engagement within the classroom we may see motivation as the will or drive to participate, engagement is the actual process of participating. In identifying motivation and engagement within the classroom we may see engagement personified in times when the attitude, thinking and doing of a student come together to show a strong involvement and positive attitude towards tasks. In the report on the *Fair Go Project*, the term ‘insiders’ is used to describe the full engagement of students when self-directed.

When students become ‘insiders’ in their classrooms they have a place and a say in the way that their classroom operates and in the learning that they are part of. It is critical that learners not only identify as insiders, but also are identified as insiders by teachers, students, parents, principals, community members and visitors (Munns, Zammit, & Woodward, 2006, p. 12).
Although the benefit of involving students in this way applies to both genders, it is particularly relevant to the success of students who are affected by gender, race, peer relations or socio-economic factors.

Active learning is accepted as one of the modes of learning that particularly motivates and engages boys, and drama has been found to be particularly effective at “…reconfiguring classroom literacy as active and embodied” (Alloway, Freebody et al, 2002, p. 133) and it has been found that boys are “willing to ‘do’ literacy in active, public ways (such as debating, drama, public speaking)” (p. 4)

In motivating students, especially boys, to want to write teachers must give them “…the opportunity to engage in writing tasks that have relevance for them rather than to them” and show students “…what they can achieve with language as well as in language…” (Locke, 2005, p. 92). Process Drama enables students to be a part of directing their learning process. Process Drama also enables writing in an holistic way. Although there is a structure to a Process Drama class, the direction taken is not always on a predetermined path. In creating Process Drama and working as ‘teacher in role’, it is often the events that unfold that determine decisions taken within the drama by both students and teachers in a collaborative process. This unique characteristic of Process Drama enables engagement to a higher degree because the power of learning is a shared process by students and teacher, and the situations in which the writing take place are authenticated by the student involvement joint construction and commitment. Bowell and Heap (2001) emphasize the importance of creating, within the classroom, joint ‘episodes’ of drama which enable students to direct and explore their ideas in action.

…one of the cornerstones of process drama is ownership, by pupil, of their learning. This means the teacher must provide a structure in which pupil’s contributions to the shaping of the work can be forefronted and acted upon…if we recognise the value of the episodic form, we can see that a broader range of possibilities become available to class and teacher. It becomes possible to stop the drama and discuss how to turn the pupil response into dramatic action. Preparation can be made, actions rehearsed, consequences seen and revisions made in their light (p.118).
In developing literacy through Process Drama ‘episodes’ students are actively involved, creating motivation and engagement. These episodes enable students to explore deeply multiple aspects of complex situations and concepts that would be much more unlikely in a whole class discussion.

Students’ engagement in school is linked to their sense of belonging to the school community. A research project at an inner Sydney school in grade 5/6 was called ‘School is for us’ and looked at the factors that empowered students to work as part of a team through a collaborative research project (Munns, Zammit et al, 2006). Students took on the role of co-researchers as they worked on a unit titled Government. Similarly, Process drama with its use of working ‘in role’, also enables this empowering of students and through their deeper engagement and motivation, facilitates their learning in literacy.

A further study looked at the use of drama strategies to improve reading comprehension in a grade five language program (Cameron, 2007). This project found that:

Drama strategies put all students in the same ‘ability’ group, increased confidence levels, built a sense of community, and brought excitement back to reading. The use of drama allowed opportunities for dialogue among students and enabled them to have experiences that connected them to the texts in meaningful ways (p. ii).

Many studies have combined the use of Process Drama and digital networking. Carroll (2004) describes a case study, which combines the use of Process drama and digital networks to generate a “hybrid form of dramatic engagement and performance”. Costello (2006) successfully utilized Process Drama with digital video composing in an eighth grade classroom and Melragon (1999) used Process drama followed by web page design, creating an ideal context for the implementation of multiliteracies. The use of technologies can be incorporated successfully into process drama as a tool, which engages adolescents, especially boys.
The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training advocates the use of active learning modes stating: “Traditional primary and secondary schooling tends to favour passive learning to the detriment of those students who prefer interactive and experiential learning styles.” (2002, p. xviii). Through Process drama we can support and extend all children in their literacy development, but most importantly those who struggle to find relevance in traditional classrooms. Cecily O’Neill defines the difference drama makes when she states that teachers using drama “choose texts and topics as locations of possibility, and for their openness to imaginative transformation and their potential for inviting students into active engagement with the work” (in Schneider et al., 2006, p. xii).

The importance of reaching and extending all boys so that they can progress in their development means teachers must provide pedagogies that cater to their specific needs. In analysing the needs of adolescents in their schooling, the importance of ‘active’ schools has been emphasized, these being ones that structure reform into the middle years, ‘breaking the mold’ of the traditional teacher and replacing with the “teacher-as-improviser” (Smyth et al., 2003, p. 177). Successful middle schooling also involves putting students in “the center of the frame” (p.191). The challenge for teachers of middle years is to create classrooms that develop a sustainable learning process that continues throughout the transition stage to secondary schooling. Process drama, as an effective scaffolding pedagogy, slots neatly into Vygotsky’s theory of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986)). Pete Meakin summarises Vygotsky’s theory of learning as:

...progressing from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal, how learning is always and necessarily culturally saturated, how language and learning are dialectically intertwined, how teaching must proceed ahead of development if the student is to progress across their Zone of Proximal development (“ZPD”)…” (Meakin, 1998, p. 63).

Process Drama can be seen as a multi-level scaffolding pedagogy through its use of a supportive structure based on student/teacher and student/student interaction (Cumming-Potvin, 2007).
As boys move through adolescence, it is a time of establishing their own identity and exploring and testing relationships with family, peers and those in ‘authority’, such as teachers. Rather than regard this testing time as simply disruptive, drama tends to enable boys to challenge and disrupt their own constructions of self and their relationship to the world around them (McDonald, 2000). As Bovell puts it: “Drama is a provocation to think about the world we live in” (2009, p. 11). Sallis describes his research in a secondary boys school, where he observed year 9, 10 and 11 drama classes and noted that the boys: “…talked about the ability of their drama teacher to make them ‘feel safe’ and ‘feel free’ in class to explore ‘issues’ that were important to them including those of masculinity” (2004, p. 112).

During Process Drama students enact and improvise situations both within and beyond their own cultural situation, exploring and developing their understanding of events and others, and creating an active mode of learning and language.

Critical literacies are developed, as Dorothy Heathcote explains, by the dynamics of Process Drama, which draw upon and expand the thinking and knowledge of the students:

“It’s the pressure, or the authenticity, of that dramatic moment that creates the new knowledge, that makes different connections, and that suddenly brings connections that have been dormant in my previous knowledge into active use in making sense of the new information I encounter” (Heathcote, 1982, p. 2).

This type of embodied learning is essential to the adolescent boys in their continuing education. Despite much supporting research and agreement as to its effectiveness, it is the implementation of the drama pedagogy, which is the stumbling block.
Two studies (Luke et al., 2003; Smyth et al., 2003) both document the importance of systemic change in middle years schooling before a culture of learning and individual student development can be ongoing and persistent.

…improved social support is necessary but not in and of itself sufficient to achieve sustainable improvement in student performance without a systematic focus upon and documentation of changes in actual pedagogy, better defined as ‘authentic pedagogy’, ‘productive pedagogy’ (Luke, Elkins et al, 2003, p. 34).

There are, of course, many factors, which still require discussion and research. As Keddie says, “It is the differences among boys that make it very difficult to identify a pedagogy which is appropriate for all boys” (2007, p. 14).
Further documented research of the use of Process Drama within the ‘subjects’ of the middle years will continue the push for more individualized creative teaching and learning, an important way forward in connecting many boys to a path of successful learning.

The vistas of process drama and literacy continue to shift as we gain deeper insights into the complexity of how learners rehearse and construct meaning. These rehearsals and constructions challenge our understanding of what constitutes a text, how we read and interpret multimodal images and signs, and how we compose and design artifacts that include linguistic, oral, and visual sign systems. As teachers and students seek to broaden these understandings in the context of “multiple literacies” (learning across a range of print and nonprint genres and media) and as part of an increasingly global society, process drama has emerged as a promising approach for exploring the multi-faceted nature of literacy learning (Schneider, Crumpler et al 2006, p. xiii).

Often boys are rated low on the literacy scale because of the standardised testing that occurs in schools which does not account for the multiliteracies exhibited by many groups in our schools including minority social and ethnic groups. Our literacy levels are gauged against a White European standard that does not account for the diversity of social, economic, ethnic and gender groups within our schools. These standards often require the hand writing of a narrative form in an isolated test environment, such as the Australian National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) writing task for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), 2009), Somerville rates this type of ‘benchmarking’ as a block to literacy learning for many students (Somerville, 2009). If we truly embrace multi literacies, we should be concentrating on teaching the process of ‘translation’ between these multi literacies.
Much true literacy can be evident within traditional storying, dramatisations, art and within digital contexts. As Somerville says:

If, as teachers and teacher educators, we think of literacy as always an act of translation, we can understand learning literacy as always about moving between the different modes and forms of meaning making and expression (2009, p. 20).

I would suggest that the learning of literacy and the development of ‘translation’ skills depend on interaction. A research study, noted in the Ofsted report on boys’ achievement in secondary schools, observed the importance of peer group on school performance. In this study the peer group was seen to operate in a ‘pro-social’ manner: “…Within the peer group the boys worked to establish their self-esteem through social interaction not academic performance” (Office for Standards in Education, 2003a, p. 10). A further report on boys’ writing in English found that the gender gap in writing did diminish in some schools where “there is much good interactive teaching” (Office for Standards in Education, 2003b, p. 22). Drama, as a primarily interactive pedagogy, can be utilised as a medium of the ‘translation’ of action and thought into written literacy.
The diagram below, taken from the *Boys, Literacy and Schooling Report* for the Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training (Alloway et al., 2002, p. 201), encompasses all of the factors required for success in literacy, factors that illustrate literacy as a complex and multifaceted range of skills, abilities, translations and interactions.

This diagram focuses on the factors necessary to enable boys to progress in literacy. Victoria Clay’s research into boys’ learning has led to her coining the new three R’s. She advocates making learning for boys in literacy “real, relevant and radical” (Hartman, 2006, p. 253), encapsulating the importance of creating pertinent learning situations for boys.
Process Drama, Literacy and the Middle Years

Process Drama could well be the ultimate, interactive, teaching pedagogy for boys, providing as it does for students to participate actively in their learning and facilitating a wide range of experiential situations. Process Drama sessions can encompass, within its structure, all of the above ‘repertoires’ as well as the new three R’s.
Research Methodology

Rationale for Qualitative Study

This Qualitative research study will be based on a Phenomenological approach whereby: “Researchers… attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 25). In order to understand if and how Process Drama effects change in the classroom it is essential to observe the learning process within the students’ regular English classroom and within the regular school program. A phenomenological approach to educational research gives a fuller understanding of the context, thus a more accurate depiction of the learning that is taking place. In recording how the students learn before the research project, it is possible to attribute changes in learning as resulting from the implementation of the research project.

In order to source a rich collection of data during this project, qualitative methods were employed beginning with a period of observation in which to gain a broad picture of a the class during a regular English session. This orientation stage equates to the conception by Ely (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & McCormack Steinmetz, 1991) of the ‘broad focus’ of Qualitative research.

Prior to the Action Research commencing, the Year 7 class in this study was observed over two periods of 48 minutes. The first class, English, took place in the home room; the second class, Humanities, occurred in the computer lab. Both classes were taken by the same teacher who was also this group’s home room teacher. During the Humanities session I interacted with, as well as observing the students and recorded field notes on the physical layout of both of the classrooms and the students’ interactions with other students, the teacher and myself.
Process Drama, Literacy and the Middle Years

This broad data informed later Action Research and Case study phases. Ely et al (1991) neatly summarise the procedure followed in qualitative research as one of moving through refining stages with the collection and analyzing of data. This funneling process is an integral part of the Action Research phase of the project.

**Action Research**

Action Research is an interventionist strategy, which lends itself to participatory research methods. Action research is, by nature, a collaborative process. The degree of collaboration however depends on access to the class and time available with the English teacher of the class. An important aspect of this method is that the students and teacher are involved and informed throughout the research process (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 8). Collaboration during this study occurred to the extent timetabling and other factors allowed. Some factors that did arise included student absences and the teacher’s duties as Year 7 Co-ordinator.

As a drama specialist I am quite comfortable with an Action Research method, where in conducting sessions with the class in Process Drama myself, I will have control over the structure of the lessons and am thus able to adjust the sessions to suit the circumstances. Costello (2003) describes the Action Research process as the four steps of: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. This pattern of action/reflection enables a reflexive approach by the researcher and the constant spiralling of Action Research cycles ensures a comprehensive study of the research question.

As the reflective practitioner I employed both ‘reflection on action’ (Orton, 1994, p. 93) and ‘reflection-in-action’ (O’Toole et al., 2009; Schön, 1987, p. 31). A further feature of Action Research, which makes it the ideal format for my research question, is that “…it is concerned not simply with studying a situation for better understanding, but with producing a change (for the better) in the situation being studied” (Orton 1994:87).
Action Research and Process Drama have in common many factors, making this an ideal research method to use with this teaching pedagogy. Additionally, both are modes of inquiry requiring a commitment from all participants.

During the Action Research phase of this study Process Drama sessions were implemented once a week over a six week period with the Year 7 class during normal timetabled English/Humanities double and single classes.

**Case Study**

The use of Action Research with a single reflective practitioner logically indicates a case study as the most appropriate unit for this research study. Using the form of a case study facilitates a small scale but in depth inquiry, creating rich, detailed data for analysis.

The research study investigated the use of Process Drama within one particular Year 7 English class, selected on the basis of the class teacher’s willingness/ability to participate and the current timetabling of the class allowing access for the researcher. This class consisted of 12 girls and 13 boys. The year 7 classes are mixed ability, with students generally being placed with those who have come from the same primary school. During the case study approach, the students in the two focus groups provided further insights. The focus groups were formed, primarily on information provided by the classroom teacher and were based on achieving a spread of literacy levels within the group, and of obtaining the views of both boys and girls on the sessions they had experienced. They were not based on groups who had worked together during the sessions, most of which were generated randomly as the activities progressed. The first focus group discussion took place during an English period at the end of the action research phase and consisted of four boys and three girls due to the enthusiasm of the students to take part. The second focus group took place the following term during recess and consisted of the same four boys in order to get more feedback from the boys’ perspective, as the girls had tended to dominate the first focus group discussion. The focus groups proved to be a rich source of data, giving the multiple
perspectives of the different boys and girls in the group. As pointed out by Stake (1995): “Two principal uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others” (p.64). Although the transference of results to other sites is limited by the nature of a case study they do give rise to a substantial body of data.

**Ethical Considerations**

Before commencing this project, ethical clearance was obtained from Melbourne University. Formal approval to conduct the research was also sought and obtained in writing from the Catholic Education Office and the Principal of the school. My study was conducted at a regional, co-educational Catholic secondary college. The college draws students from a wide radius of 70km, including students from both city and country areas and a range of socio economic groups, although mostly white, middle-class. Students are offered places in the school based on an interview and other criteria including school reports and commitment to Catholicism. Year 7 students are able to sit a scholarship exam, providing access to able students of lower income families.

Access to the school and communication with the teachers was gained via the Vice Principal (a personal friend), with whom I also discussed the selection of the Year 7 class. After meeting with the Vice Principal, access with the teachers was negotiated via email requests. With the intercession and assistance of the Vice Principal the Year 7 class and teacher were finalised. The entire procedure took approximately five months.

Information letters and permission notes were then dispatched to the parents and students of the Year 7 class, all of which were returned within a week. The information to parents included the assurance that the Process Drama session would be a part of the regular school curriculum. The English work for the Term during which the study occurred was planned around the novel *The Silver Donkey*. In order to fit in with the regular program of this English class, all drama sessions were planned around the class’ current study of this novel. Students were assured both via
note and verbally at the start of the study that they could choose not to have their data included and could indicate their willingness to participate or not in the focus group. In speaking to the students at our first meeting, I referred them to the sheets that had been sent home and also re-iterated their freedom to deny access to any data collected about them at any time. Only one student indicated on his permission sheet that he did not wish to take part in the focus group. All students were also encouraged to speak to the class teacher or myself at any time if they had any concerns or questions about the research project. The ethical importance of this element of ‘continual communication’ is stressed by Glesne and Peshkin (1992, p. 125).

To encourage the collection of high quality data it is essential that the researcher gain the trust of the participants. The inclusion of a period of overt participant observation aided in the development of trust in the researcher by both the students and the class teacher. It is also important, as did occur, to be completely open with the participants as to the nature of the research and the type of information being recorded.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms have been used in field notes and the written thesis.

Any use of video/audio taping, as well as being included on the permission form (PLS) to parents/guardians, was also confirmed with the individuals themselves on an item-by-item basis before being used in the thesis.

Data Collection Procedures and Verification

An in-depth and rich collection of data was accumulated during this qualitative study. As the Action research practitioner who taught the Process Drama sessions throughout this research study, I was not in a position to record field notes as I taught. So as to record the details while they were still fresh in the mind, immediately after each session I allowed time in which to record notes on the session and I also made notes on ideas and directions for the next and future sessions. Anecdotal notes on
various informal discussions with the English teacher about the Process Drama classes and the students were also made. As reflective practitioner, these notes both informed the analysis of data and also the spiralling format of the planning of further sessions with the class.

Supplementary data was accumulated through video taping of two of the classes, audio taping of the two Focus group discussions, samples of students’ writing collected before, during and after the sessions and the students’ 2010 NAPLAN results. The student voice was captured during the two post implementation focus group sessions, one immediately after the sessions at the end of Term 3, the other at a later date in the middle of fourth term. Students’ work that was collected during this study included preliminary writing samples before the action research phase, pieces of writing that were part of the activities the students experienced and writing which the students completed at home as a direct result of the activities. The writing samples included were: a draft copy of a letter written as part of their class work on the novel before the Action Research phase began, reflective writing following the first Process drama session, group written work completed during the sessions, individual written roles for the drama, letters written in role both during the drama and at home and reflections in role at the conclusion of the last Process drama session.

Continuous analysis throughout the data collection phases of the research project was essential to enable both the collection of relevant, focussed information and to inform the cyclical nature of the action research. As the data was collected and analysed throughout the project, themes emerged which were validated through verification with further data collected through a process of reflection on action. This follows the rigorous process as exemplified by Cohen (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007):

…data are scanned to generate categories of phenomena, relationships between these categories are sought and working typologies and summaries are written on the basis of the data examined. These are then refined by subsequent cases and analysis; negative and discrepant cases are deliberately sought to modify, enlarge or restrict the original explanation or theory. (p. 472)
As the reflective practitioner, written and oral language activities were devised to give rise to further data as the project progressed. This followed the process as described by Ely (1991):

…qualitative researchers proceed through a series of stages in observing-participating. These stages move from an introductory, general overview with broad focus, to one in which the researcher narrows the focus to very specific aspects of the situation that have called attention to themselves in the ongoing cycle of logging and analysing the data (p.48).

The student voice, both during informal observation in class and in the focus groups provided an authentic verification of the effects of Process Drama sessions on the students’ attitudes and learning. De-briefing after each session through informal conversations with the classroom teacher or discussions with the Vice Principal during the project also served to inform the process.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis occurred concurrently throughout the project, as I made field notes after each session and evaluated the responses of the students and class teacher. This analysis informed the planning of each Process drama session. As I reflected on the sessions and reviewed the written samples and field notes collected, both positive and negative data emerged. Both have been included in the data analysis as they aided a “crystallisation” (Richardson cited by O’Toole, 2006, p. 148) of the emerging themes in the research project. As these themes arose the data was categorised under several headings related to the research question.

Initially the data from the audio and video recordings was listened to/watched several times, noting responses and actions that related to the Research Questions as stated in the Introduction. The second focus group discussion was scheduled to take place four weeks after the action research phase to gain additional data and perspective from the boys on their learning, after the audio recording of the first focus group revealed how much the girls had dominated the discussion.
Written samples were analysed against the VELS writing standards at the Year 7 level, and writing samples collected from each student before and during the Action Research phase were compared.
The Research Project

The secondary college at which the research project was conducted shares the site with a feeder Primary school. The Grade 5/6 classes share the same precinct as the Year 7 and 8. The two schools are administered separately and do not have planning, classes or common areas together. The only instance of integration I saw while at the school was a Middle Years Literacy cluster meeting which I attended as one of the primary teachers from one of the four local Catholic primary schools and included the year 7/8 English teachers.

The year 7 class in which I conducted my study was selected through a process of consultation with the Vice Principal and the English subject teachers of that level. The English teacher of this class also taught them Humanities and was their home room teacher. Although this class was not timetabled any double English classes (each period was 48 minutes) they did have consecutive English and Humanities, which the teacher was happy for me to use for the Process drama sessions, as she could swap the Humanities to another of their English periods. One Process drama session was conducted in a single period due to my other teaching commitments.

Observation Session

The Year 7 class consisted of 25 students: 13 boys and 12 girls. Prior to beginning the Process drama sessions I spent one English period with the class, firstly introducing myself and explaining the project and why I would be working with their class. In explaining the proposed study to the students, I was completely open and honest with them about the questions I was posing in relation to them and my use of Process drama with their English class. Originally I had planned to spend more than one session with this class so that they would become more familiar and at ease with me. I had also intended to introduce some audio and video taping during their normal classes to familiarise the students with the observation equipment. When students can regard a process as routine they are less likely to change their behaviour in response
to such intrusions. Unfortunately, time constraints brought about by the time taken to obtain ethics clearance and the approaching end of the school year meant that this was not possible. The period of participant observation was reduced from the planned 4 weeks to one, the action research phase from 10 weeks to six. This naturally reduced the amount of data that was able to be collected.

The year 7 classroom is a portable, arranged with all the other year 5/6, 7 and 8 classrooms around a central quadrangle in an area adjacent to the primary school and below the permanent buildings of the secondary school. The classroom is rectangular; two adjacent, shorter walls are all windows, the back wall is pin board and the front wall held the whiteboard. Either side of the whiteboard are doors leading to teachers’ offices. This room is quite congested with 3 rows of desks facing the whiteboard and banks of lockers on each side in which students keep all their belongings. The teachers’ desk is at the front of the room, slightly to one side and facing the students’ desks. On the right hand side of the whiteboard is a grid of homework reminders for each of the Year 7 subjects. On the left are Birthdays, important notices and team points. Some student work is displayed around the room; there is a large rubbish bin, a VISY recycling bin and a chipped metal cricket wicket. There is a prayer table with candles, a mission box and bible under the window as well as a bookcase of encyclopaedias and National Geographic magazines. School bags are scattered around the floor and on top of the lockers, blazers are hung over the back of some seats. The furniture consists of metal-framed tables and basic black and green chairs. This secondary school classroom is markedly different to Primary classrooms I have taught in, which are generally full of books and learning materials, myriad displays of colourful student written and art work and lots of learning prompts such as lists of words and questions from inquiry units. Desks are usually grouped together in hubs to facilitate small group or pair work and there is usually a cleared floor area for small or large groups. The classroom set up illustrates quite clearly the different type of learning experiences in primary and secondary schooling.

The English session I observed was based around the study of the focus novel of the term, *The Silver Donkey*, by Sonya Hartnett (2004). The teacher, Karen (all names used are pseudonyms), began by reviewing a previous chapter and asking if anyone had words they had looked up in a dictionary. After this whole class discussion she
began reading a chapter of the book to the students, stopping often to ask questions or clarify words. Karen is a very effervescent teacher with lots of energy and reads with great expression, encouraging discussion as she reads. Students were encouraged to follow in their books and mark the text in pencil as they go. As I looked around the room, watching the students I marked the huge difference in physical size of the boys in the class, with some having already reached maturity and the height of adults and others much smaller in stature. Throughout the reading I noticed one of the boys, Troy, fiddling with a glue stick. Another boy was scribbling on his book with two pens, yet another was trying to distract the boy sitting next to him. At the end of the chapter Karen posed some questions on the events: “What is the relevance of giving back the lucky charm at the end of the chapter?” “What is stopping the soldier getting away?” The latter question was answered by Troy putting up his hand and replying, “He’s blind”. As Karen wrote further questions on the whiteboard she initiated a class discussion about lucky charms, for example a St Christopher medal. Only the girls contributed to this discussion, talking about rabbit’s feet, gold sovereigns, scapulas and Buddha statues. Karen then stated, “Here’s the challenge” and read out the writing task on the board:

Do you have a lucky charm?
If so describe what it looks like, how did you get it and why is it lucky.
If you don’t have one make it up!!

Next to me two boys have a private conversation:

“Do you have a lucky charm?”
“No, have you?”
“Yeah, you know that soccer thing on my bag?”

Although they hadn’t contributed to the discussion, and spent a great deal of time appearing disengaged during the teacher’s reading and subsequent discussion, these boys obviously felt some connection to the process that occurred, or was it a need to discuss the writing task which was now their homework for that night? This is an interesting facet of the way some boys in year 7 work and learn. The need to orally
work through tasks had also emerged during a previous participant observation study I had undertaken as part of a coursework unit. When observing an all boy year 7 class the year before, it was interesting that some of the boys would talk themselves through each stage of the set activity.

…it seems to be an essential element in their engagement in tasks. Many of the boys talk as they work, not to anyone in particular, and sometimes they are thinking aloud or simply verbalising and commenting on their actions (Britt, 2008).

After the English session, I accompanied the class to an IT lab for their Humanities class. The students were working on a report about an endangered species and most were in the final stages of constructing the report, based around a scaffolding framework of information required. Karen described their report as a “snapshot of your chosen species”. There was much peer tutoring and chatting as the students worked, particularly amongst the boys. One boy explained his report structure to another as “like a player profile in the Footy Record”. Karen moved among the students, helping them with both their ICT presentation skills and content; “you might need to search for some more information”.

**Process Drama Sessions**

Most of the subsequent Process Drama sessions with this class occurred in a double period just after recess. There were 5 double periods and one single taken during this research study in the third term of the school year. I would arrive at the beginning of recess to sign in and have a chat with Karen about what I planned to do in the session and also the responses she had noted during the week following the sessions (if she was not busily running around trying to catch someone as she was also the Year level Co-ordinator). As the complete content and format of each session is included in the appendices (Appendix 1), I will not attempt to describe each session in detail, but highlight instances which illustrate the effects of the Process Drama on the class and particularly the boys in the focus group.
Session One

When I entered the class for the first session the students were waiting outside the classroom for the teacher to unlock the door. They entered, some milled around chatting or going to their lockers, some sitting straight down at their desks. After saying hello to the milling group I asked them to move all their desks and chairs back to the perimeter of the room. This immediately got their attention and all the class quickly moved the desks and chairs back out of the way.

As many of the students had not previously had much drama experience (most Catholic primary schools in this catchment region do not have drama specialists) we began with some warm up games and activities. Many of the boys were quite silly and rowdy during the rattler game, some taking the opportunity to use their physical presence to disrupt the game, but all enjoyed it nevertheless.

All students co-operated and worked well together in the groups of three for the Photocopy activity that followed, some producing thoughtful images. The extracts on the shooting of young deserters by the British army produced a very quiet reflective period within the class and the passing of the small icon of the silver donkey enabled all students to give voice to their individual thoughts in role as the soldier, some of which showed great insight into the personal dilemma he had faced. Many students brought up issues such as the fear of dying and the issue of the soldier’s choices, which were explored further in following sessions. The freeze frames further increased their awareness of the situation faced by the main character.

Already this first session had changed the dynamics of the English class, with every student contributing both individually and in small groups to their understanding of the main character in the novel. Most students were happy to enter into the activities, with many of the girls showing the most enthusiasm. A few of the boys had trouble ‘letting go’ enough to get into character, and these were the ones who gave quite stereotyped, ‘safe’ responses. Peer pressure was a definite factor here, with the boys more concerned with what their ‘mates’ thought and did.
At the end of the session I asked the students to respond to some reflective questions, to gauge the response to the session and identify what insights, if any they had gained. I allowed these responses to be anonymous if they wished, as being the first session, and not knowing me at all, I felt I would get a more honest response in this way. One of the boys mentioned how the initial warm up activity, using blindfolds, “showed me how hard it would be to be blind”. Another student said “I think by doing the activities it helps me put myself in the lieutenant’s shoes”. And another “I have gained some insights with the drama. I understand that Lieutenant Shepard is feeling a lot of different emotions from different things he has seen”. One student wrote that she “…learnt how harsh it would have been to be in the war”. Of the 20 responses to the question: What insights have you gained into the character of Lieutenant Shepard? four responded negatively that they had no insights, 16 in the positive.

Session Two

When I arrived at the school for the second session a week later, Karen was eager to inform me that the students have been asking if I was coming to do drama today and responded enthusiastically when she said ‘yes’. When we went back to the class after recess the students had cleared all the tables and set up the chairs in a circle ready to start and were sitting expectantly, waiting. The focus for this session was to explore the traits and emotions of the main character in the story- the soldier who had deserted.

All students participated enthusiastically in the warm up games and this engagement continued throughout the double period. Using a pair strategy in the mirrors warm up activity ensured that all students were actively involved. The pair strategy was mentioned as a positive aid to learning during the boys’ focus group discussion when Ben stated “when you talk to your partner” as a way that helps him in his schoolwork.

Following the warm ups we discussed the character traits evidenced in the novel and completed a group brainstorm and rotation. There appeared to be one or two boys who wrote inappropriate words on the sheets during the Brainstorm activity (see
Appendix 2 for a complete list of responses). Most of the responses in the brainstorm activity were very perceptive and displayed an openness to sharing their thoughts on these character traits, with many students relating these to their own experiences as well as the novel.

One of the brainstorm sheets

Each of the groups then participated enthusiastically in creating and presenting a group scenario based on the sheet they finished with, being very much on task and engaged in creating their piece throughout.
The conscience activity which followed was especially illuminating. Up until now I had felt the students generally were quite sympathetic to the soldier wanting to leave the war (AWOL) and they felt it was okay for him to do that. The conscience activity began with quite a few coming on to that side and stating he had been through enough, had done his bit and should go home to see his terminally sick brother. However that changed dramatically as we progressed, with the boys especially stating it was his duty to stay at the war and fight, until a majority of the students stood on the negative side. This drama activity, where the students had to make a physical choice and back that up with a verbal comment, was very successful in crystallising their analytical and emotional thinking on this issue. Many of the boys’ comments reflected the Australian aspect of mateship, and not letting down your friends by leaving.

The forum theatre was moderately successful, but would work better if the students had had more experience in drama, and with this technique in particular. The boys were highly engaged in the action although some were not ready to relinquish their own ideas to the suggestions of the group.

As we had run out of time I asked the students to write a letter, in role as the soldier, for next week. The class teacher stated they could complete it for homework (they usually had homework from their normal English Class). Cremin describes such writing in role as “fostering imaginative engagement” (Cremin, Bearne, Dombey, & Lewis, 2009, p. 98). In working within realistic situations as we did in this Process drama session, the students were able to actively engage with the feelings and emotions of the soldiers they had read about in The Silver Donkey.

During this second session, many of the boys contributed positively in their mixed groups, with the girls being less dominant. They appeared to be more comfortable with the Process Drama approach and were involved throughout by the activities.
Session Three

In Session 3 the warm up games were run through quickly with all participants fully involved. This session was intended as a closer analysis of the traits of the main characters in the novel, hopefully leading to a more informed and in depth result when writing in role. The main activity was ‘Role on the Wall’. As larger sheets of paper were not available, each group drew their allocated character from the novel on A3 paper before writing descriptive words. Some students showed great perception while discussing and writing these words and all students enjoyed this activity very much, evidenced by their on-topic discussion in the groups.

One of the aspects that students stated they enjoyed was being able to work in groups of varying sizes. As the students displayed and explained their posters they displayed obvious pride in both their artwork and the content. All students were happy to give other groups feedback and ask questions about each other’s perceptions of the characters, stimulating more class discussion.
The story activity was based on each group being given a Picture Story Book (PSB) to read and construct a presentation as a response to the story. Their story scenes varied widely, from being directly related to the story or character, to relating to their own experiences in their particular lives, to relating back to the novel, *The Silver Donkey* (Hartnett, 2004), but changing a particular event in the story. In using the story, *In Flander’s Fields* (Jorgense & Harrison-Lever, 2002), this group related their enactment to the scene in the *Silver Donkey* where Ernie is shot, but in their version the German soldier (one of the girls) displays compassion and allows the wounded soldier to get away. In *The War* (Vaugelade, 2001) the group’s literal translation of a quite complicated storyline demonstrated an understanding of the irony of the red and blue armies who had previously been fighting against each other, allying against the threat of the yellow army. In *That’s Why* (Cole, 2006) the students gave an excellent analogy of everyone having their part to play. With *The Best Christmas Present in the World* (Morpurgo, 2004) this group was particularly creative, led by the girls. The boy in this scene just played along as they improvised (but was obviously enjoying it immensely as he was the centre of attention as the girls fought over him). This group work was a turning point for this boy, as he participated more freely and actively in all the following sessions.
Session Four

In the fourth session, once again the warm-up games were important in setting the scene for the later group work. The ‘social roles game’ stimulated discussion on the various roles that exist in different communities, especially those that were unfamiliar, such as Shaman. If this had been my regular class, I would have extended the community role aspect into a more in-depth study. As we ran out of time for the Circle of Characters activity, it was left out for this session.

The rest of this session comprised creating group roles for the subsequent Process Drama sessions. Some students were very quick to decide on their roles in the community. The groups were mixed boys/girls. In most groups the girls and boys worked in independent sub-groups, setting up family units. Some girls organised the boys to have a connection between the different members. The variance in the ways in which the boys participated in the activities and also their written results seemed to indicate differing levels of maturity. All students entered into the activity willingly and most were very enthusiastic in discussing and creating their communities. The written roles produced varied considerably. Some boys created fantastical characters, not related to the real life in their communities at all but reminiscent of some fantasy play station game.

After this session, I went through each student’s role sheet and wrote 4 or 5 questions on each to encourage the students to deepen their thinking about their role and develop it further.

Session Five

The fifth session was a single period and felt very rushed in relation to our previous sessions. We ran through the warm up very quickly and ended up running out of time for the reflection. However all students were enthusiastic about the Process Drama and eager to get started.
The discussion of the photo sent to the Father at the front set the scene for their own improvisations. All were happy to expand their roles based on the questions I posed, apart from a couple of boys who had to be convinced that they needed to be people and not mythical characters from some fantasy adventure tale. A couple of the boys then decided they would base their characterisation on the grandparents in Charlie and the Chocolate factory and were very realistic in role. I’m not sure if this was stimulated by their view of the era in which the drama is set or through wanting to lie around and do as little as possible! They were certainly quite active in contributing verbally to the scenario.

Session Six

The sixth session entailed small vignettes followed by all the groups participating in a whole class Process Drama, where each group lived through a condensed version of a day in the life of their character. This was disrupted during the drama by the return of a family member who has been at war, about which each student composed a diary entry. During this Process drama the students questioned the teacher in role as the soldier returning home.

The students were fully involved in their roles and most interacted within their family units. Two of the boys, Robert and Ben, low level literacy learners who attend a supplementary literacy class, were totally engrossed in their roles to the exclusion of any other distractions. When speaking later in the Focus group discussions, they stated that the Process drama at the end of the unit was their favourite part of the drama sessions:

“The activity we did where we’re all in the group, like we had fishermen, the working out and the acting out”.

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Focus Groups

At the end of the final session, as I was arranging the time and group for the focus group discussions, many students indicated they were eager to participate, particularly some of the girls. The resultant group was four boys and three girls. The first focus group discussion involved the students viewing the video of one of the Process Drama classes and commenting on events and behaviours as well as direct questions from the researcher related to their involvement in the drama classes. During this discussion I tried to ensure that each of the participants was given an equal chance to give their opinions, as the girls were very assertive and tended to drown out the boys. After documenting the first focus group discussion, I decided that further data from the boys was required and arranged for a second discussion session with the just the four boys in mid fourth term.

The resultant data was a rich source of the students’ reactions to the drama class, as well as opinions on the broader topics of transition to secondary school and their learning preferences. The first focus group discussion concluded with one of the boys requesting I please ask that their English teacher teach some drama in their English class.

The students’ opinions as recorded in focus group discussions, reflected how they felt the Process Drama sessions had affected their literacy abilities. All students felt that working and talking in their groups helped with their writing, with comments such as:

“when you went around and saw the words that other people had written, like to describe the person, the words that I read, I started to use them”
“...and you can like talk and discuss things with your friends”

Discussion in English classes is “... not as fun as that was”
The boys also felt that the drama helped their Literacy skills:

Sam: “like when you came it was more fun and I learnt more, I got better in spelling and writing and stuff”

Ben (in the fourth term focus group):

“I’ve been getting better in English since term 1 & 2 …especially this term, I’ve been reading books more. For 30 minutes a night out loud. I like, got a good book and I started at the start of this term.”

Although Ben did not make a direct connection between the drama sessions and his willingness to read more of his own books, it is possible that the fun and positive experiences he had while we investigated *The Silver Donkey* through Process Drama strategies prompted a more open attitude to reading books in general. He stated: “When you came and we did all that English stuff that helped me learn too”

Each of the drama strategies employed, even those used as warm ups, actively involved the students in interacting in a way that was not possible in their traditional English classroom environment. The physical process of moving back the furniture signalled for the students an active learning mode, with which they were immediately engaged. When I arrived for each subsequent session, the students had prepared the classroom and were sitting quietly ready to begin the session. The students entered enthusiastically into all the activities and the oral interchange between students was extensive. Not only were students involved in oral exchanges in pairs and groups but also in contributing individually to a whole class interaction, such as with the conscience activity. As has been expressed in the focus groups, the oral nature of these sessions was an important factor for the boys, especially the low level literacy boys, in their writing.
Analysis of Data

As the description of the sessions and presentation of oral data has shown in the previous chapter, Process Drama strategies during Year 7 classes were extremely successful in motivating and engaging all students, both boys and girls. In scrutinising my reflective notes, students’ writing samples, oral recordings and video recordings it was evident that even most of the resistant boys were completely drawn into the action by the second session and were participating freely. The boys seemed to particularly enjoy being physically involved in the warm up exercises, and these served as excellent icebreakers, focusing the students into the session.

During the second focus group discussion, in response to questions relating to their transition from primary school to secondary, most of the boys were concerned firstly about the physical size of the school and finding their way around. As one stated, “the first day I came here I was late to homeroom” and another “when I came here I didn’t know anywhere to go”. As research has shown, the physical is an important dimension for boys, both in the physical space surrounding them and their personal physicality. All four of the Year 7 boys in the focus group preferred subjects with a practical or physical application: art, metal work, plastics and Health and Physical Education.

Unfortunately, the boys who initially were more reticent to engage in the Process Drama sessions had declined to join the focus group. Their point of view would have been interesting, shedding light on how they felt about the use of the active strategy of Process Drama in English. Of the two asked to join the focus group, one was well below average on his NAPLAN written test with the other’s NAPLAN result placing him above average in the narrative writing test, but neither showed any interest in joining the focus group for discussion. These two boys, despite being quite disruptive in the first lesson, freely joined in activities throughout the rest of the study, even at times volunteering for activities.
As argued in other studies (Cumming-Potvin, 2007, p. 487) the scaffolding provided by peer interaction is important to participation and cognitive development. Throughout the drama sessions, students worked in a variety of peer led groups, quite often with students they would not normally work with. This social interaction provided great leverage for further development of independent learning, evidenced by the two boys no longer being held back from participating through the influence of peer pressure. In the second session Jack, a seemingly disengaged boy, spent a while finding a pen for the brainstorming activity, shuffling books around in his locker. However in viewing the videotape of this session, it is obvious that he is involved despite being at his locker. He continues to listen and respond to his group and others during this time.

Another important factor in student learning, the relationship to the teacher, is an aspect that these Process Drama sessions facilitated. Although I had not taught this class previously, they quickly developed a trusting relationship in working with me in these sessions. At the end of the first session, when writing a reflection, the students were not required to put their name on their writing. Many students chose to include their names, which suggested to me that they felt quite comfortable in sharing their thoughts with me, an indication of the way in which drama operates in creating a joint working familiarity with students and teacher.

When I returned to the school for session three Karen met me in the staff room and immediately launched into an enthusiastic chat over the letters that the students had been writing as a result of the session two Process Drama. She was amazed at both the effort and content, which had resulted from this piece of written work. “They went to much more trouble for you than they did for me!” At first glance it was obvious that most of the students had gone to a great deal of effort.

Both the boys and the girls had gone to greater effort in responding to the Process Drama sessions with this writing task than had been previously demonstrated in their English class. Letters were rolled in scrolls, decorated with artwork, included photos of families and were published in appropriately official or older style type, with many protected by plastic pockets. Roger, one of the boys who appeared less engaged, produced a typewritten letter written in a formal style with a concluding sentence.
demonstrating empathy with the subject and the genre of official letter writing: “You have raised a great man who was willing to die for his country, for that a [I] congratulate you.”

The effort shown in the student’s writing demonstrates, as Cremin states:

Writing in role offers children fictional purposes and audiences that feel real in the context of the drama. The lived experience of drama becomes a natural writing frame that is charged with the emotions and experiences of the imagined world, promoting voice, choice, stance and passion in writing (Cremin et al., 2009, p. 98).

In analysing the vocabulary used in the letters, many of the words that had been used by students or myself during our drama activities appeared. Many of the students’ written pieces demonstrated that the talking and writing during the ‘Role on the Wall’ activity (the posters from which had been displayed on the pinboard for the duration of the sessions) had been transferred to their writing tasks in these letters. The words that occurred frequently were: trustworthy, courag/e/ous, brave/ry/ly, determination, proud, loyal. The students added to the stem words appropriately according to the sentence context. Each of the letters displayed content appropriate to the context of the letter, with phrases such as: killed in action, in the line of duty, has passed away, represented his country, done his country proud, fight for his country.

The letters also showed, in comparison to the initial samples collected before the drama sessions began, increased flow and sequencing in constructing the letter, with appropriate paragraphing based around logical sequencing of ideas. There is a clear progression in all the letters from a formal introductory sentence, to the unfolding of further information about the situation surrounding the death and the personal attributes of Ernie that the Lieutenant noted. Most of the students’ persona as the Lieutenant showed a clear empathy with the fallen soldier.

The following two case studies are analysed against the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) for writing at Levels 3 and 4 and represent some of the differences noted between the students before and after writing samples. The first is Robert who attends Remedial English classes each week. Robert experiences low self esteem
because of his low literacy levels, but I observed him increase in confidence throughout the Process Drama sessions, expressing his enjoyment of the sessions and showing an overt engagement and willingness to participate with studious application in all the activities.

In his original sample (a first draft) the class teacher had asked them to write a letter to their mother before embarking on a mission. Most of the students began this letter with the initial phrase, *It seems we are about to embark*, followed by variations on the word mission. I would assume that this was in response to the prompt given by the teacher. Apart from the topical words, *dried biscuit and bully beef, snipers, war zone*, the vocabulary and sentence structure used by Robert is quite simple. There seems to be a confusion of ideas with no real logical sequence and also repetition of ideas in this letter.

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Dear Mother,

It seems we are about to embark on our mission, to save the last mission in the world.

We are all writing letters home. I think this will be the last letter to you, and it's about
family. I'm going to miss you and the others.

I'm sad too. Say hello and maybe goodbye to John and the family. If I survive this,
I'll make another letter to send and tell you I'll be coming home soon.

I've seen some of my platoon. They got to
be great honor. I can hear the noises
in the other war zone and tell... hopefully I will get home and I'll
get healthy again. I hope I got through this and that John and
I can get better. Our last meal we are
having dried biscuit and bully beef. It is
delicious. Can't wait to eat some home

love from,
Sincerely, your son
Lt. Shepherd
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Dearest Mother,

It seems we are about to embark on our last mission. We are all writing letters home. I think this will be the last letter to you and the family. I’m going to miss you and the others. I’ve heard some of the other’s letters. They are sad too.

Say hello and maybe Goodbye to John and family. If I survive this I will make another letter, to send and tell you I will be coming home soon. I’ve seen some of my platoon die but in great honour. I can hear the snipers in the other war zone and the tanks. Hopefully I will get home and John will get healthy again. I hope I get through this and that John and I can get better. For our last meal we are having dried biscuits and bully beef. It is disgusting. Can’t wait to eat some home made food.

Love from your son

Lt Shepard

When comparing the second letter, written as a homework piece, and therefore possibly as the result of help at home, the writing is more ordered and sequential. The writing is divided into logical paragraphs. The sentence structure is much more complex with multiple use of conjunctions and appropriate punctuation. The vocabulary displays more frequent use of a variety of words used in context. The flow of the writing explicitly demonstrates his emotional involvement in this letter, particularly the final paragraph. In Process Drama, students develop a deeper understanding of character as demonstrated by the empathy shown here.
Dear Mr and Mrs Whittaker,

We are so sorry to inform you but your son will not be returning home. He was a brave man and he was a hero for going to the war. Ernie was kind, he loved to serve our nation and the best thing about Ernie was that he was extremely trustworthy.

I was so proud of your son, he was such an inspiring man, especially for fighting for his country, he was also funny and had lots of courage.

He did not die of suffering and hardly ever showed fear. He will always be remembered as a hero. His was saying “Pocket” right at the end before he passed. It wasn’t to later on we realised that inside his pocket was a photo of you and your family at your bakery, so here is that photo for you to maybe put up in your shop.

Once again, I am very sorry for your loss, I wish to extend our condolences and deepest sympathy to you and your family. If there is anything that I or my companions can do please don’t hesitate to call upon us. I will visit you often to offer my support.

Yours Sincerely,

Lieutenant Sheppard.

The second comparison example is of Troy’s writing. Troy was named, by the classroom teacher, as one of the better students, but this was not reflected in his NAPLAN results, where he was placed within the appropriate band for his year level but below the National average. In Troy’s first sample, again a first draft, he displays a wide range of subject appropriate vocabulary, a use of complex sentence structure, visual analogy and a great empathy with the misery of war. Troy also uses a few cliché phrases and similes, for example ‘titan of great power’; ‘fraught with danger’, but has included some vivid descriptive passages.
Dearest Mother

It seems we are about to embark on a mission. I have experienced some sights that I all most cry about everyday. My thirty-one men being reduced by every whistling bullet. I am afraid about the next battle I see will be the last I see. Some days my ears are blocked from the toppiling calls of young men. The trenches are filled with flies, scarlet blood and men, laying there like they were sleeping.

When I fight I feel like a titan of great power. I feel so sorry for all the fallen men I see each day, I always get depressed.

I am fraught with danger about this mission. It seems that most men are very worried as I am but I have to stand tall and forge my men to victory.

I am also concerned about the wellbeing of John. I think about him every minute of every hour of every day. I wish I could be there to help you mother but I can’t.

Mother I am so sorry but I probably won’t make it out alive because our mission is dangerous. So mother I will always love you xxxooo

From your loving son

Troy’s second letter, in contrast, is very controlled and formal in tone, entirely appropriate to the context of the letter. Again he has used a range of vocabulary and phrases suitable to the subject. Paragraphing shows a sequential ordering of ideas and he introduces some original phrases such as kept his friends very close and war is a trouble(d) place not appearing in any of the other students’ letters.
Dear Mr. and Mrs. Whittaker,

I wish to inform you that Private Ernest Whittaker was killed in the line of battle. He has done his country proud.

He was a reliable person with many qualities such as bravery, courage, trustworthiness, humor, always had a positive attitude to things and always thought of good not bad. He showed all of these tremendous qualities in the line of battle and also when he had a break. Ernest also kept his friends very close.

I hoped I would never have to write this letter but it is my duty. Ernest told me, he loved working in the bike repair shop and if I ever needed a repair done he would do it for free.

War is a trouble place and I am so sorry for your loss of Ernest. May he rest in peace.

Yours sincerely,
Lieutenant Shepard.

During the Process Drama sessions, the students have not only voiced their interest and excitement with the strategies and activities used, but also demonstrated a widely increased and expanded use of oral language in all the sessions. The analysis of the written samples also indicates that the use of these strategies enables the transference of this oral language into the written form. Not only did the written samples demonstrate the use of a widened range and complexity of vocabulary, but also in some instances, a greater complexity of sentence structure. The use of the drama activities could also be said to have increased the students’ awareness of adapting their writing to fit the situation, in this case, the formal context of the letter written in role as Lieutenant Shepard. It is important to note that when the task was explained to the students at the end of the drama session, I did not have time to provide any
scaffolding or modelling as to the format of the letter. Through their active participation in the Process Drama strategies, the students have engaged in a deeper involvement and understanding of the characters and issues in the novel. This improvement in their writing indicates that this engagement can lead to improved literacy skills.

Many studies have found the relevance of and interest in the topic to be an important determinant or incitement to quality writing (Hawthorne, 2008, p. 33). Process drama has been shown here in this research study as a conduit by which relevance and interest can be developed for and through writing in role.

Through the active interaction between students in this study, their peer mentoring and joint construction of verbal and visual dramatic scenes, there was a clear development of a wider vocabulary, clarity and use of complex syntactic forms in their writing. This is supported by research such as Cremin et al (2006) with 6/7 and 10/11 year old students on links between drama and writing:

> The findings from this research suggest that drama can do much more than create the conditions to motivate and engage young writers. Whether children’s ideas are spontaneously generated and recorded or initially incubated and later re-visited, drama offers them a supportive scaffold which can foster thoughtful, imaginative and effective writing. (p. 288)

This research study has indicated that Process Drama can engage boys in their learning in this English class. The active learning strategies motivated the boys to participate in both oral and written language activities. The two comparative writing samples from Troy and Robert show an improvement in their writing skills in the areas of flow, sequencing of ideas and the appropriate use of form and language, always acknowledging the different demands of the two tasks. This study, however, was not extensive enough to show a marked improvement in the boys’ writing, given the small sample and short period of time.
The data did demonstrate a substantial increase in engagement during the classes. As Troy stated when asked about the Process Drama sessions as compared to a regular English class

“It’s more interactive with people and you say your ideas...you’re up and about and thinking about the characters and thinking about what you’re doing” and Sam “you don’t get bored if you do fun stuff, you care about your work, you want to do it more” and Ben “normally I don’t put my hand up”.

For these boys the Process Drama gave them the opportunity to be actively involved in their class, to put forward their views in both oral and written form and to think more deeply about the issues arising out of their study of the novel *The Silver Donkey*. The selection of the Picture Story Books (PSB) within a structured but open ended task in session 3 was a deliberate strategy to facilitate an opportunity for lateral thinking in relation to the issues of war which had arisen during previous drama activities. The use of PSB in Process Drama has been an effective literacy strategy used in many studies such as Exely (2006) where she explains how

…transmediation between picture book resources & process drama strategies activates the four resources (Luke & Freebody, 2000) of oral, gestural, visual & written literacies. Wilhem’s (1997) research has already shown that when struggling adolescent readers transmediate between process drama strategies and written texts, their understanding of texts, metacognitive awareness and insights into characterisation are heightened. Thus transmediation has already shown itself to be a potent means by which middle years students can deepen their content understandings & literacy resources. I suggest that it can also be an effective means for developing middle years students’ oral, gestural, written & visual literacy perceptions & expressions. (p.5)

This ‘transmediation’ was evident in many of the groups’ representations of their PSB. Although two groups presented a literal enactment of their story with no real
depth of inquiry into the issues raised, all of the other groups displayed creativity and deeper insights in their interpretations.

Adolescence is a time when boys (and girls) can find their self-esteem does diminish, particularly if they are having difficulties in literacy. An important aspect of using Process drama is demonstrated here, especially with low level learners, in that it gives them a safe avenue in which to participate, increasing their confidence in their own ability to contribute to the class. During the second focus group discussion Troy summed up his experience in saying: “When you came and it just helped, you like physically do it, it gets more in your mind and you think about it more”.

The NAPLAN writing results of the class in which I conducted this Action Research project show a marked disparity between boys and girls. Of the 11 girls in the class, only two are below the national average benchmark (18%); of the 13 boys there are 8 below the national benchmark (61%).

Although the active learning mode of Process drama has been seen to be a motivating force in boys writing, the low performing girls were also helped by this intervention study. Karina’s Year 7 NAPLAN writing result plotted her at over two bands below the national average and the lowest level writer in this class. However her letter in role as the Lieutenant writing to the parents of the deceased soldier demonstrated VELS Level 3 competence and showed a great deal of effort.
Karina’s letter was quite short but showed a good grasp of text construction, with logically ordered paragraphs, a variety of appropriate vocabulary including extensive use of adjectives (unfortunate job, exceptional man) and verbs with complex sentences containing simple conjunctions, such as the first sentence.

26/7/16   1916

Dear Mr & Mrs Whittaker

I have the unfortunate job of informing you that a German killed your son Ernest Whittaker at dawn on Monday July 1916 in the line of duty.

Your son was an exceptional man and he never gave up hope. When he was in times of trouble he thought of Whittaker’s Bicycle Repairs and all the good times he had there. He said that if my bike were broken he would fix it for free. I was there when he died and all he said was “in my pocket” and in his pocket was a photo. This photo was of his family in front of their shop. When I showed him the photo he smiled and said to tell you he loves you all and will miss you

Sincerely

Lieutenant Shepard
Karina had gone to great lengths to authenticate her letter: ageing the paper with a tea or coffee stain, using an older style type and placing it in an envelope sealed with wax.

Both genders, through their oral and written responses, indicated their enjoyment of and enthusiastic involvement in this active pedagogy. Comments from the two focus group discussions included:

“If your body’s not really moving, your brain’s not really going”.

“Like you get more fitter instead of just sitting at your table, like usually, you just sit in your table and the only time you get up is to get a pencil”

“Like for English we usually don’t want to do it, but with this we want to do it ’cause it’s kinda like sport, like we wanna, like, more activities and games, that’s what we like”

“made you engaged and interested to do it”

“made it more funner”

This intervention was successful in motivating the boys because they were actively, bodily involved and having fun. The written reflective responses collected at the end of the first session where, although not required to, many students put their names on
their pieces, showed that the majority of the students had not only had fun but also gained new insights into the character of Lieutenant Shepard.

Within the productive pedagogy of the Process drama sessions, students experienced choice, relevance, engagement, active learning, a teacher that is engaged in learning ‘with’ them and the camaraderie of working in various social groups. Even the most reticent boy, in his reflection at the end of the first session, demonstrated the effects of this ‘immersion’ when he wrote: *I gained there feeling emotesions*. One of the low literacy level boys wrote: *That no won would not like to go to war, because of the death*. An anonymous student wrote: *The insights I gained from today’s activities is that I found out how scary it would actually be in the war* and another: *I think by doing the activities it helps me put myself in the lieutenants’ shoes*. From the very beginning of these sessions the students have demonstrated an active involvement in their learning, which has transferred to their writing (Cremin, Gooch, Blakemore, Goff, & Macdonald, 2006).

Most students displayed some change for the better in their writing of the letter in role as the soldier, as compared to that collected prior to the study. Although this change was difficult to quantify because of the different demands made by the two writing tasks, most notably one being comparatively formal, the other more personal and informal, they generally showed an improvement in flow, the range and complexity of vocabulary and sentence structure used, the organization of their ideas and most definitely in the time and care taken as shown by their presentation. Cramer states: “One of the keys to transformation in the literacy curriculum is using the dramatic experience for ‘reflection’” (Cramer, Ortlieb, & Cheek, 2007, p. 39). Through experiential drama and reflection activities, the boys of this class were given many opportunities to deepen their thinking and knowledge. This occurred through the medium of Process Drama and its ability to provide them with a safe space in which to experiment, try out their thoughts and perceptions and take risks. The deepening of this thought was demonstrated in both their written and oral language. It gave the students, especially the boys, room to move and speak.
Concluding statements

This research study sought to investigate the effect of the use of Process Drama strategies on the engagement and writing skills of boys in a Year 7 English class. The data collected during this study clearly indicates that Process Drama was one effective means of engaging boys in their learning during English classes. It also revealed some improvement in the boys’ writing produced during the sessions. The gains noted in the students’ engagement and the transference to their writing skills in the activities of the process drama classes were not exclusive to any gender. However, this active form of learning was particularly successful with the boys of this class, given the boys’ poor writing performance before and evident lack of engagement in the English lesson observed. The fact that this method of teaching is not gender specific and does not cause disadvantage to any of the students is a high recommendation for its inclusion in every middle years program. However, will these gains continue as these students move on to Year 8? After an extensive review of a wide range of schools across Australia, the research study Beyond the Middle found that:

Without a comprehensive and well-planned approach to literacy in the middle years, the instances of exemplary practices noted in the case studies tended to have limited shelf life in terms of student learning and gains (Luke et al., 2003, p. 111).

Although this study has found Process Drama to be an exemplary model by which to teach this English class, further longitudinal studies are required to gauge how it stands up to long term scrutiny. A year long reflective practitioner action research study in a year 7 class, with more sophisticated data gathering and analysis tools would provide a more stringently reliable basis on which to make decisions as to how this strategy could be incorporated into a systemic model for middle years learning. Even better would be to follow this up as the students moved on to Year 8.

Why is Process Drama not used consistently in middle years classrooms? Generally teachers at this level have a lack of experience and knowledge of this pedagogy. The
basic problem is the competing elements of content, methods and results during teacher training and in the classroom. Many drama proponents find it difficult to convince Universities of the importance of adequate training in Process Drama within the Literacy teaching curricula. In fact some drama professionals actively dissuade this by insisting on the separation of drama as a stand alone subject. Deakin University lecturer, Joanne O’Mara, is one who has consistently researched and written on forging links between drama and literacy (Healy & Honan, 2004; O'Mara, 2003). Also writing on the links between drama, multiliteracies and productive pedagogies in schools, Dunn (2007) discusses the innovative changes needed to produce creative learning curriculums. I would encourage all middle years teachers, co-ordinators and curriculum leaders to seek out and actively encourage further teacher professional development in the use of more active, creative pedagogies such as Process Drama in the teaching of literacy and thinking skills. The seemingly ‘dis-engaged’ boys from the initial sessions demonstrated a connection with the pedagogy of Process Drama whereby they could participate in a kind of ‘physical literacy’ rather than the conventional oral and written literacy of this English class. Used on a regular basis as a standard pedagogy, the development of Literacy through Process Drama could create sustainable and extensive gains throughout the middle years of schooling, especially for boys.

More needs to be done.
Appendix 1

Process Drama Session Outlines

Session 1 Process Drama

12/8/09 Periods 3 & 4

Warm up games
- Rattlers;
- Photocopy; and
- Hot Seat

Whole class circle sharing
- Read extracts “Shot At Dawn” relating to soldiers executed for deserting; discussion
- Collective character: pass around a small silver donkey; speak words and thought of the soldier
- Multiple role circle
- Headlines: create a newspaper headline with a freeze frame picture

Reflection
Students respond to the reflective questions:
- How do you feel about Lieutenant Shepard?
- Which character do you identify most with and why?
- What insights into the characters did you gain from the drama activities?
Session 2 Process Drama
19/9/09 Periods 3 & 4

Warm up games:
- Pruie; and
- Mirrors: fear, jealousy, anger etc

Character traits
- Brainstorm: In groups rotate around sheets adding words stimulated by each character trait: bravery, cowardice, courage, fear, trustworthiness, suffering; final group reads out responses. Discuss as related to events of the Silver Donkey.
- Scenarios: each group creates a sequence of actions/events based on their sheet, speaking only one sentence each.
- Conscience activity: select a volunteer to be the soldier and sit in a central chair. Each student comes forward to either the for or against side of the chair and speaks their thought as to whether Lieutenant Shepard should have left.
- Forum Theatre: enact war scenes/group instruct soldier on which option to take/actions as it evolves.

Further reflection
- Students asked to write a letter as Lieutenant Shepard to the parents of Ernie.

Session 3 Process Drama
26/8/09 Periods 3 & 4

Warm up games:
- Circle games (A & B);
- Everyone who/musical chairs;
- Making enquiries;
- All change/conversations; and
- Character Game: What would you do if?
Character traits:
Role on the Wall
Chn trace around one person in group; write on the person the character traits of a character from silver donkey
Question prompts:
♦ What was that person’s role?
♦ What character traits were needed to fulfil that role?
♦ What individual acts did they perform that were important?
♦ What doubts did they have?
♦ Did they do anything they regretted?
♦ How did their behaviour show what type of person they were?

Story exploration:
Each group has a Picture Story Book:

• *The Best Christmas Present in the World* (Morpurgo, 2004)
• *No!* (D. McPhail, 2009)
• *That’s Why* (Cole, 2006)
• *War and Peas* (Foreman, 2002)
• *In Flanders Fields* (Jorgense & Harrison-Lever, 2002)
• *The War.* (Vaugelade, 2001)
♦ Create a scene to show the most important character trait of an individual.
♦ Each member of the group needs to do or say something that helps reveal that individual’s character.

Process Drama:
Begin process drama with an outline of the communities.
Students in three groups, each group is given a sheet of information about their community. They need to organise their roles and each one writes a description of themselves: physical/character traits, where they live, what their job/position in the community is.
Session 4 Process Drama

2/9/09 Periods 3 & 4

**Warm up games:**
- Dude/Look Up;
- Shakes;
- Social Roles Game; and
- Circle of Characters – in small groups

**Role playing:**
- Introduce concept of extended Process drama/role play
- Discuss the setting up of three communities; students in three groups; each group is given a sheet of information about their community. They need to organise their roles and each one writes a description of themselves: physical/character traits, where they live, and what their job/position in the community is.
- If time set up and play out a day in the life of each community, share.

Session 5 Process Drama

7/9/09 Period 4

**Warm up games:**
- Mr Tap;
- ‘I am a Tree’ improvisation (each person has to be something that relates to the one before); and
- I am walking

**Role Analysis/synthesis:**
- In circle pass around photo of family which was sent to the father in the war. Discuss their dress, stance, and era; how they would have felt etc. to establish the characteristics of the time we are investigating/operating in.
- Hand out role sheets with questions.
- Students spend a few minutes writing answers to their questions.
Introductions, in pairs, to a pair from another area. Ask questions to find out as much as possible about each other.

Action clip- 30 sec of action in role (6am in the morning)-freeze, messenger comes in (TIR)- 30 sec action clip after announcement.

Reflection:
Students write down possible situations for improvisation within their communities, snippets or scene ideas, what might happen if a stranger came into their community – relate to silver donkey- how did the children know they could trust/believe the soldier (was he telling the truth?)

Session 6 Process Drama
16/9/09 Periods 3 & 4

Warm up games:
♦ What are you doing?
♦ Hitch hiker

Group improvisation
♦ A day in the life:
♦ Overheard conversations: small groups discuss the person who has gone to war
♦ The difficulties this has caused, how they feel about him/her going.
♦ Conscience alley – Matt as 16 year old wanting to sign up for the war.
♦ Conflicting moment: coming back from the war: hot seating, questions.
♦ “I told some people I had a dying brother but I don’t really.”

Reflection
♦ Diary entry about the events of the day
Appendix 2

Brainstorm Responses

Bravery
Courage, trust, energy, saves me/people, unafraid, brave, fighter, police, fireman, everybody, stick up for yourself and others, Joker, Catwoman, Wonderwoman, Super Mario, Ninja Turtles, The Hulk, Spiderman, Batman, Harry Potter, Mother, Uncle, Voldemort, fighting for your country, war.

Courage
Dying for someone else, courageous, sticking by your friends, sticking up for yourself, boxing the tough guy, not afraid of dying, determination, overcome your fears, to do something, bravery, fighting for your life, never giving up/keep trying, fighting in war, joining the defence forces, trying something new, when sick, strong willed, saving whales, heroic, fearless, awesome person, eagles, successful, going in when it’s dark, save a day, confidence, our dad, footy,

Fear
Not knowing what to do, frantic, sacredness of something, dark, death, centipede, war, deny against, rape, depression, scary, cry, bite your nails, anxiety, scared, suicide, murder, ferris wheel, wet bed, freeze up, spiders, paedophiles, acid, big moths, pregnancy, no toilet paper, having an operation in hospital, rejection,

Trustworthiness
Animals, trusting someone with your life, Mum, Fabrice, friends, family, proud, keeping a secret, stronghold, Marcel, the mirror, honesty, your best friend, smile, awesome person,
Suffering
School ties, drawing, underwear in the freezer, sad, pimples, depression, no apology, keeping a secret, natural disaster, being alone, the Jews in WW2, parents, death-in the family/pets, house fires, school work, Black Saturday victims, world hunger, missing cat, endangered species, pain, disease/sickness, depression, heartache, grief, families, terrorism, someone steals from you.
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