

**The school drama book: drama, literature and literacy in the creative classroom,**  
by R. Ewing and J. N. Saunders, Sydney, Currency Press, 2016, 310 pp., \$49.99  
(paperback), ISBN 9781925005349

As a primary school educator, I often find myself caught between the desire to create engaging, inspiring lessons for my students and the pressure to meet the demands of an increasingly overcrowded curriculum, and a results driven education system. Yet now with *The School Drama Book: Drama, Literature and Literacy in the Creative Classroom* (2016), I am convinced both outcomes can be achieved effectively. Ewing and Saunders provide primary and teachers of the early years with an approach to explore drama, literacy and transdisciplinary concepts, through the combination of quality literature and drama pedagogy.

Robyn Ewing, a professor at the University of Sydney and John Nicholas Saunders, Sydney Theatre Company's Education Manager, draw together the rationale, related research and some of the units developed that underpin the 'School Drama' program. Since 2009 the University of Sydney, in partnership with Sydney Theatre Company, have offered an artist-in-resident teacher professional learning program for primary teachers. It aims to utilise drama as a pedagogy and quality resource with literacy texts to improve English and literacy outcomes for young learners. *The School Drama Book* introduces teachers to the background and success of the program, in addition to the extensive research regarding the relationship between drama, quality literature and literacy, and the powerful benefits of utilising them in tandem. In 'Learning about the art of drama', an entire chapter is devoted to the discussion of the various dramatic elements and the reader is provided with detailed descriptions of the drama devices employed in the workshops thus, ensuring the accessibility of the text to extend to teachers and educators with little to no background knowledge in drama. Links are made to specific workshop examples to aid comprehension of the process drama techniques.

*The School Drama Book* introduces teachers to 22 drama units that have been refined through the years of the program. At the beginning of each chapter, Ewing and Saunders present a brief rationale for the text selection, citing the key themes for exploration, dramatic opportunities offered and its relevance to contemporary issues. The story selections are richly layered in symbolic potential and powerful themes such as courage, hope and friendship. Each unit suggests an appropriate year level, however many of the units can be easily adapted for other level and stages depending on the context, teacher purposes and goals and the needs of the students. The key aims of the unit and the specific English and Literacy outcomes are clearly outlined, as well as a list of resources and related texts. Included are well known historical Australian texts, 'The Rabbits' by John Marsden and Shaun Tan and 'The Burnt Stick' by Anthony Hill and Mark Sofilas. Each workshop is designed to span about 60 min for kindergarten/foundation students and around 90 min for students in grades one to six or beyond. The dramatic devices, class grouping, resources and text excerpts are clearly highlighted at the beginning of each workshop and they offer prompts for teacher questioning and whole group discussion throughout. Each activity is clearly linked to a specific purpose, therefore assisting teachers in understanding the learning outcomes and ensuring a clear direction for each lesson.

Drama devices for each unit include whole group activities such as walking in role, word circles, soundscapes and sculpting, thus skilfully scaffolding teacher understanding and confidence with drama strategies and conventions as they move deeper into exploration of the narrative with their students. Suggestions for follow up activities present students with the opportunity to consolidate their learning and extend their creativity through writing in role, journal entries or discussions, whilst also providing teachers with concrete examples of their learning journey. Ewing and Saunders are careful to create strong connections between the picture books or novels and the students' own lives and feelings.

In 'Birds like Mr Percival never really die', which is based on *Storm Boy*, there are strong links to the humanities and social science curriculum and the cross curriculum priority of sustainability as stated in the Australian Curriculum. As the students are introduced to the setting and orientation of the novel, they are encouraged to research pelicans and the Coorong area of South Australia in which the novel is set.

Many of the upper primary units in the collection provide teachers with a platform to explore powerful themes including prejudice, trust, difference and selfishness, as well as issues such as refugees, poverty, war and stolen generations. With many Australian schools now adopting an inquiry approach to humanities and social science studies, *The School Drama Book* offers a flexible, engaging and transdisciplinary approach to learning in these areas. An example of the book's transdisciplinary approach can be seen in the drama unit 'A scrap of wonderfulness' which concludes with an arts integrated workshop offering painting, dance, drama or writing activities as a tool for reflecting on the learning.

It would be beneficial to read the picture books or novels alongside each drama unit so as to gain a deeper understanding of the connection between the drama and the text. Nevertheless, most are quality well-known texts that are easily accessible online via videos, audio and summaries or from a school or local library. Some of the drama units such as 'How goes the work' and 'A scrap of wonderfulness' require multiple copies of the narrative text which may be limiting for some teachers depending on the school resources, although this may be overcome by accessing online versions.

I believe that it is incredibly difficult to learn subjects such as drama and teaching through a book rather than experience, due to the intricate human qualities and interactions that are essential to both. However, *The School Drama Book* goes a long way to achieving its desire to bring theatre, literature and literacy alive for young people, by providing engaging workshops that are sure to ignite students' creativity and deepen their learning. Ewing and Saunder's work presents generalist primary teachers with an accessible and flexible framework to purposefully explore language and literacy. I recommend this book to teachers of all backgrounds who are seeking an engaging, student-centred and transdisciplinary approach to English and literature in their classroom.

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