Dramatic Inquiry and Anti-Oppressive Teaching

BRIAN EDMISTON
School of Teaching & Learning, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA

Teachers have long used dramatic pedagogy to make oppression visible and to explore with young people how they might challenge it. By analyzing the pedagogy of one high school teacher in a high-poverty, inner-city freshman English high school classroom, I illustrate some of the complexities of how dramatic inquiry (dramatic pedagogy used as part of inquiry-based learning) may be used to effectively disrupt oppressive practices experienced by students. Kumashiro (2004) argues that anti-oppressive teaching must create, for teachers and students alike, both experiences of, and ways to work through, crises. I illustrate how dramatic inquiry is an effective pedagogy for mediating students’ encounters with imagined crises that resonate with their real lives. I apply Bakhtin’s conceptualizations of dialogue and events to understand why a teacher’s use of dramatic inquiry may disrupt experiences of oppression as well as how an oppressive status quo may unintentionally be reified. Additionally, I show how working as an ensemble in dramatic inquiry may create the space in which a self-excluding student may reposition himself in relation to the classroom community. Finally, I consider some of the challenges for teachers in learning to use dramatic pedagogy that may challenge an oppressive status quo in their own teaching.

Megan Ballinger is leading an intense conversation on what a mother should do if she discovers drugs hidden in her child’s bedroom (see Figure 1). Should she call the police as some students have suggested, flush the drugs down the toilet as happens in the narrative they are reading (a page from which you can see in Megan’s hand), or confront her son when he returns home? The last idea has just been suggested by Yolanda, the standing girl, who along with other students has embodied the mother’s actions in a brief dramatic performance of several lines from the story.

Dramatic Pedagogy

At the time of writing, Megan had just completed her third year of teaching in an inner-city, high-poverty high school in Central Ohio. She had participated in a professional development program on teaching Shakespeare and other complex texts, directed by me, that had introduced her to active and dramatic pedagogies and provided in-class support (Edmiston and McKibben 2011).

As an English teacher, Megan wanted students to appreciate how literature and language could be relevant to their lives both as people and students. Their dramatic performances and related inquiries were integral to their reading and were preparing them for writing. The event being dramatized when the photograph was taken would have resonated in different ways with the lives of everyone in the classroom, and at some time during that
session most had made critical and analytical comments. Many were keen to embody and enact different scenarios.

Megan’s four freshman high school classes met in hundred-minute blocks for a semester. The group in the photograph had been with Megan since January 2012, and some of the sixteen students could be absent any day because of suspensions or absenteeism (though students did not seem to skip her classes). In late April–May 2012, during a three-and-a-half-week period, Megan used dramatic pedagogy as she and the students read extracts from a part-biographic, part-autobiographic narrative, *The Other Wes Moore* (Moore 2011). I joined Megan for six sessions with one group at the beginning of the unit and again for two sessions at the end. We met after class during her planning time to debrief and plan. We also maintained e-mail correspondence throughout that time.

The photograph above was taken during the fourth session when the students were interpreting an extract using dramatic inquiry. I use the terms “dramatic pedagogy” and dramatic inquiry (rather than process drama, drama in education, or applied theatre), as I have elsewhere (Edmiston 2011), to highlight that Megan’s pedagogy was dramatic and was centered over several weeks by collaborative inquiry into the meaning of extracts from the book and their relevance for the students’ lives.

**Anti-Oppressive Education**

Like Kevin Kumashiro (2004), the founding director of the Center for Anti-Oppressive Education and the author of *Against Common Sense: Teaching and Learning Toward Social Justice*, Megan knows that, “whether in or out of schools, students were and are learning things that reinforce an oppressive status quo” (26).

Since at least the work of Augusto Boal (1979), classroom practitioners have harnessed the tensions in dramatic conflicts in anti-oppressive education. For example, taking a critical literacy perspective, Carmen Medina and Gerald Campano (2006) have shown how dramatic pedagogy can expose power relationships, critique competing perspectives, and engage with issues relevant to young people’s immediate lives.

In this article, I explore how dramatic pedagogy, and in particular dramatic inquiry, was an important tool as Megan moved to disrupt oppressive dimensions of the status quo.
At the same time, I consider how and why practices that may seem to challenge oppression may actually be reinforcing it. One oppressive practice that ran through the social fabric of the school was the surveillance and exclusion of students. Another oppression was an example of what Kumashiro (2004) refers to as a “common sense” cultural assumption: the agents of the justice system act in a neutral way in relation to the race of defendants. There was also a third oppression of which Megan was largely unaware: self-exclusion by one individual.

**Unnoticed Oppression in the School and Classroom**

Clearly, the students in the session were deeply and collaboratively engaged. Or were they all? Look again at the first photograph (Figure 1).

Aaron is sitting in the corner where he frequently parked himself to watch what was happening. On the first day when I arrived in the classroom, Megan had cajoled Aaron into joining in some games. Usually he would sit out and make snide comments directed at the teacher. Megan assumed this was an individual decision. As she had put it in our postsession reflection, “He wants to join in, but I think he just can’t bring himself to do it.”

Aaron was caught up in an unnamed oppressive status quo largely unnoticed by us. Only later did we infer that though he had tended to exclude himself from the group, others had also largely left him alone. As he seemed to accept the situation, did it matter? It was not until toward the end of the unit we realized collaborative dramatic inquiry had created spaces of equality in which Aaron’s relationship with his peers became sufficiently open that he was able to explore and take up a different social position in the classroom community (Edmiston 2003).

The photograph in Figure 2 was taken a little more than two weeks after the photograph in Figure 1. Aaron has just rolled his chair over to chat with some of the other students, having just completed a writing assignment on the computer that can be seen on the table.

By the end of the year, though he was still occasionally oppositional and resistant to participation, Aaron would choose to talk briefly with many students informally, including another girl (not shown in the photograph) who on occasions had gathered others, including
Aaron, into whole-group activity and who had chosen to work with him. Aaron was the only student who identified as white in an all-black classroom. Paradoxically, working as an ensemble to deal with a wider cultural, racialized oppression seemed to have had a significant effect on Aaron’s relationship with others in the classroom.

**Teaching and Learning Through Crisis**

Kumashiro (2004) takes a critical stance on teaching:

>a process that aims not only to give students knowledge and skills that matter in society, but also asks students to examine the political implications of that knowledge and skills . . . not only searching for the hidden messages that cannot help but exist in our classroom [but also] making visible these hidden lessons and the various lenses students use to make sense of them. (37)

Kumashiro’s focus is on teacher education, but his pedagogical assumptions apply to all classrooms. Teaching in this way can be very challenging because it requires that I embrace feeling “unsettled and uncertain,” not only about how to teach but also about myself as a teacher in my specific cultural setting, whether in a college or school classroom (Kumashiro 2004, 37). I have to accept that I am always in the process of learning to teach in this way, and that, along with the students, I always have a limited and limiting viewpoint on “hidden” messages. It means that ironically, “we need to put front and center the very things we do not want in our teaching, the very things we do not know are in our teaching” (Kumashiro 2004, 37). Aaron’s isolation was one of those hidden messages.

Kumashiro (2004) embraces experience of crisis as essential both for students reframing oppression in school classrooms and for teachers learning anti-oppressive pedagogy. It is in a crisis that dimensions of those hidden messages and ways of framing the world may become more visible to people of any age. Kumashiro (2004) states:

> If students are not experiencing crisis, they likely are not learning things that challenge the knowledge they have already learned that support the status quo, which means they are likely not learning to recognize and challenge the oppression that plays out daily in their lives. (30)

A crisis is “an experience of emotional discomfort and disorientation that calls on students to make some change” (Kumashiro 2004, 30). The anthropologist Victor Turner (1975) locates “crisis” situations culturally: They feel disruptive when we experience a “breach” of a cultural norm that requires “redressive action” in which people attempt to resolve the crisis (or accept a schism; 37–41).

The corollary is also true: If I do not feel there is a breach in social order or do not feel the need to do something about it, then I do not experience a “crisis,” even when others do, or would if they felt a breach in an idealized social order they were working toward. No one seemed to feel there was any crisis in relation to the status quo that was excluding Aaron. There were many more visible crises daily in the school and classroom to deal with. For example, two days before the photograph reproduced as Figure 1 was taken, a tussle between Crystal and Marquis erupted, resulting in her leaving the room with Megan to talk and then Megan leading an honest but inconclusive discussion with the rest of the class on the need to be respectful of everyone, no matter how annoying they can be.

In exploring pedagogical examples, Kumashiro (2004) illustrates a core challenge that he argues must be embraced by any teacher, or teacher-educator, committed to
anti-oppressive education. Paradoxically, even when they do experience a crisis, people may actually resist change more strongly than they did before. That is why, he argues, teaching must involve students in “a learning process that helps them to work through their crisis” (28).

Using examples from Megan’s teaching, in this article, I explore some of the possibilities for using dramatic inquiry to assist young people to work through several fictional crises. First, I consider some of the challenges for teachers in learning to use dramatic pedagogy to challenge an oppressive status quo in their own teaching norms.

Crisis in Teaching

Megan had been working through her own crisis in teaching. She embraced the uncertainty about teaching that Kumashiro (2004) argues is so necessary if we are to navigate crises. As she put it in an interview in September 2011 at the beginning of her third year in the classroom, “I’m a big fan of making mistakes and learning from them. I want the kids to know that I’m learning to be a teacher alongside them learning whatever we’re studying and learning how to get on with one another.”

In-classroom support was available to all of the teachers in the professional development program, though I spent longer periods of time with five case-study teachers, including Megan. Some of the other teachers, including colleagues in the same school, seemed not to have embraced uncertainty and the desire to change to the same degree that Megan had. We did not conduct exit interviews, but more than a third of the teachers dropped out after one or two years. There were many other factors affecting attrition in the program, but at least some of the teachers seemed unable to work through crises that each had faced. The teachers were expected to implement a challenging novel pedagogy and change aspects of their practice, specifically their relationship with students, which was made more visible to them in supportive discussions following my classroom visits. They were also expected to reflect on their changing practice in the public setting of a university classroom.

I first met Megan fresh out of her licensure program that had culminated with student teaching in an affluent all-white suburban classroom. In our conversations during the three-year period of professional development, she frequently contrasted her struggles in an urban setting with her previous experiences working with privileged youngsters, much like those with whom she had gone to high school. This comparison seemed to be central for how Megan, a white middle-class woman, came to critique her previous assumptions as well as to accept, and learn from, the changes she needed to make to her teaching as she applied the pedagogy in an inner-city high school. She was engaged in an ongoing dialogue with her former self. As she said in May 2012, “Don’t get me wrong. I liked the kids in the suburbs, and I was pretty good at teaching AP Literature, but now I much prefer the honesty and directness of our kids. Teaching this way is tough and it takes time to learn, but I can get to know them as people and help them learn important stuff, in ways that I missed out being able to do in my student teaching. I used to think that teaching content was the most important thing, but now I know it’s teaching kids to question and learn from each other.”

At the same time, Megan, like all of the teachers who entered the third year of the program, was clear that the professional learning community we had built over that time was crucial for her continuance. Many similarly would have agreed with what Megan said to me in May 2012: “Quite honestly, if I hadn’t met with you and with other teachers to plan, talk, share our struggles, and gain new ideas, I don’t think I would have continued.” Building community was equally important in her classroom.
Megan’s classroom practices countered the oppressive status quo of the social and cultural fabric in the school. Though I did not conduct an ethnographic study of the urban high school where she had taught for three years, I did gather stories from Megan via informal talk and correspondence as well as formal interviews. In collaboration with university colleagues, I was coauthor of a published case study of another teacher in the same school that highlighted and critiqued both the significance of building community in an urban setting and some of the challenges for teachers using dramatic pedagogy (Enciso et al. 2011). During the three years, I visited the school many times, including the classrooms of five teachers and the hallways in between. Megan and I get along well as colleagues; we enjoy sharing stories of success and frustration in and out of the classroom, and we like coteaching and analyzing for student learning. Megan had various leadership roles in the school and talked with me openly about her experiences.

Dimensions of the oppression in the school culture, which seemed to be largely unnoticed and uncritiqued by her colleagues, included the following: Though the young people came from the local neighborhood, once they walked into the building they were largely only regarded as individual students rather than members of a community; there was a high level of surveillance of students’ behaviors coupled with low levels of responsibility; and exclusion of young people was a norm, both from classrooms and via suspensions from the school. Additionally, though project-based learning was notionally in place, in reality, the curriculum was largely test-driven, pedagogy seemed not to be very culturally responsive, and most teaching was didactic and required only low-level thinking.

As teachers, building community with our students is not an option. The question I ask teachers is this: What quality of community do you want to build? Megan wanted to create a community where collaboration with any peers was a norm. Aaron was by no means the only student on the edge of the classroom community; I could have told the story of how Megan worked to include other young people as active participants in collaborative small- and whole-group activities.

From her first day with the group, Megan had intentionally built an inclusive community. Like the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere, Megan had a presupposition of equality as she worked toward creating a “community of equals” (Ranciere 2007, 87). Her practice was democratic, verified the equality of all voices, and was “political” in the sense that “people who appear to be unequal are declared to be equal . . . the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being” (Davies 2010, 79).

Megan’s inclusive, equalizing, anti-oppressive practices included negotiating class expectations that were posted on the wall. This was a disruption to the status quo: Students expected to be told what to do, rather than be asked what they thought would create the sort of classroom they wanted. Megan made her assumption of equality clear from Day 1: the principles of respect and safety they had agreed to, as well as specific rules, applied to her as much as to the young people. For example, everyone had to try to be respectful even when others were “out of line,” and no one could make cell phone calls. Several times during the semester, those expectations had been revised. For example, the rule against playing music on an iPod when writing was relaxed. Megan agreed that students could listen to music provided it did not distract them or others. On the last day of class, I interviewed several students, one of whom gestured toward the list as an example of why he liked the class: “We get to make decisions. We like each other and get on well together.” When I asked him why he thought Ms. Ballinger was a good teacher, he said, “She’s fair.”
That year, Megan’s classroom had more of a workshop feel about it than in the previous two years. After much negotiation, she had finally been able to replace desks with chairs and moveable tables that she put on the perimeter of a larger room. The change in physical space made it much easier to shift into more collaborative active or dramatic tasks that involved physical movement.

Building community can directly challenge oppression when exclusion is a norm, provided a group views the exclusion as a problem. Working in her favor was the fact that many of the students knew each other outside of the classroom because they had been to neighborhood schools. The boys would often jostle with each other, and the girls might fix each other’s hair. They seemed to expect that tempers might flair but also that relationships could be restored provided people did not consider themselves better than others. That cultural norm was clear the day Crystal stormed out of the room. As Marquis explained to Megan, “She thinks she better than us.” Aaron had quipped from the edge, “She cheats more on tests than I do, and that’s sayin’ somethin.” The comments were not presented as open to debate. Later, Megan said she felt she could have helped repair Crystal’s relationship with the group if she had had time, but with only a few weeks left until the end of the school year, she reluctantly accepted a new homeostasis as Crystal chose to get on with individual work.

As she had done with each group during the four months since they first met with her, Megan had worked hard to build relationships with all the young people. She talked with students informally, in and out of the classroom, and tried to get to know them as people. As she said, “I want them to know that I’m interested in them, that I care about them.” So as not to feel overwhelmed, during her time at the school, she had learned how to create some emotional distance for herself while still doing what she could to help them as people as well as students. She was diligent about not overreacting when they might speak of neighborhood violent incidents, family distress, or provocative comments that included Aaron’s frequent references to guns and weapons. The racist remarks that Aaron sometimes made under his breath were different for her. Megan would always ask him to stop, and later in the semester, he began to desist and add a brief, “Sorry.”

In Megan’s classroom, despite her enthusiasm, the engaging structure of most activities, her negotiations, or her cajoling of them, students would drift in and out of tasks. Her academic standards were high and were made apparent in goals, rubrics, and individual feedback. In addition, she was clear that she would accommodate tasks for people’s needs if necessary but would not force students to participate. She was aware of the social lives of children whose minds might be elsewhere, for example because they had a parent on drugs, a sibling to be cared for, or a fight to recover from.

Aaron was the only student who seemed content to remain an outsider. He frequently made reactive comments like, “I ain’t doin’ that” when a task was set, but then he often completed the work. Others would sit out or resist participation, but there were peers in the room that they would “hang out with.” Because there was little attention to building an inclusive community outside Megan’s classroom, it is unlikely that Aaron’s exclusion would ever have been noticed, or been regarded as a concern in any other group.

In their first week together, Megan had introduced collaborative games that at times all of the students had played together. One of their favorites was The Sun Shines on All Those Who . . . , where people cross the circle if they agree with a statement made by teacher or peer, like “The sun shines on all those who like ice cream.” Aaron had participated after his usual display of reluctance. However, when students chose partners or formed friendship groups for other tasks, Megan assumed that Aaron opted out. What she realized later was that additionally he was not chosen. Near the end of the year Megan and I wondered had
others in the class viewed Aaron’s detachment, like Crystal’s stories, as an attitude of being “better” than them?

**Working as an Ensemble**

Working as an ensemble was stressed in our professional development program (Enciso et al. 2011), and Megan was one of the teachers who transformed her practice when she placed ensemble at the center of her pedagogy. Rather than regard working as an ensemble as something you do first via a game, before moving on to active and dramatic approaches to reading text or exploring a curriculum topic, we had stressed that working as an ensemble, building community, and dramatic pedagogy could be synergistic, with one affecting the other.

Geoffrey Streatfeild, a Royal Shakespeare Company actor, explains the social value and learning potential of working as an ensemble over time. He is talking about working on the floor of a rehearsal room, but he could be describing a classroom where young people are able to move around to work on their feet as well as at a desk:

> Our ever-growing trust enables us to experiment, improvise and rework on the floor with an astonishing freedom and confidence. This ensemble is a secure environment without ever being a comfort zone. All of us are continually challenging ourselves and being inspired by those around us to reach new levels in all aspects of our work. (as cited in Neelands 2009, 183)

That ideal guided Megan. Especially when dramatizing text, collaborative whole-group active and dramatic tasks with shared goals open to participation by all became dominant but not ubiquitous. One week late in February, after I visited for a session to assist Megan begin a one-week study of *Macbeth*, she decided to refocus her practice as she said with commitment, “I’ve got to work more with the whole group and get back to stories that really grab them.” Later, she reported that Aaron had watched closely that week, but rarely did he actively participate. On the other hand, Marquis, who had previously been resistant and disruptive, had come to the fore as a leader. As the curriculum required her to focus on a grade level-wide integrated project, it was not for two months that Megan felt able to return to using dramatic inquiry.

**Inquiring Into Crises in Dramatic Events**

There was crisis in the lives of every youngster in the classroom. Though Megan was always open to talking with them one on one about challenges they were facing (from pregnancy to the death of a friend to a suspension) and where possible using school professional resources to help, the students rarely wanted to publicly discuss, in any detail, the “normal” crises in their lives.

Without using dramatic pedagogy, it is unlikely that Megan would have been able to effectively address any of these crises and open up unexamined oppressions to inquiry. Yet Megan was able to use dramatic inquiry to create spaces where the young people could productively begin to examine indirectly some of the less apparent oppressive practices they lived with, through examining events in *The Other Wes Moore* (Moore 2011). She began with dramatizing a description of a robbery.

The author, Wes Moore, tells parallel stories from his life, alongside those of a man of the same age and with the same name who grew up in poverty in the same project in
Baltimore. Now aged 33, the author is a decorated marine and a Rhoades scholar. After being told of the fate of another person with the same name as his, he did online research, communicated with him, and then met over several years to record his stories. The “other” Wes is in prison without the possibility of parole. He was convicted, along with his older brother, of murder during a robbery of a jewelry store in 2001.

Megan wanted the students to take up a critical inquiry stance on the story of the “other” Wes Moore. Rather than just accept his outcome fatalistically she intended the students to critique both some of the events in his life, like the one being dramatized as the photograph in Figure 1 was taken, as well as the verdict, given that Wes claimed he was wrongly identified and the fact that the veracity of the evidence was disputed at the trial.

The photographs in Figures 3 and 4, taken five minutes apart during the first session, show the class working collaboratively to dramatize the robbery. They had worked in five small groups each focused on reading a single paragraph from a five-paragraph description.

**Figure 3.** Working collaboratively to dramatize a scene.

**Figure 4.** Aaron joins in.
in the book. Their task: show what happened as if you are creating a reenactment at the trial of Wes Moore. Those watching as an audience were asked to do so as if they were either the jury or lawyers at the trial. Megan was reading the passage and leading an analysis that connected words on the page with what was being depicted.

Though this event was a crisis in 2001 for those in the jewelry store in Baltimore and later for those on the jury, the students did not experience it as such in their classroom in 2012. For them, the task must have felt more about enjoying being up on their feet, or watching their peers represent a highly engaging dramatic event. Critical analysis was resisted when Megan asked a group to rerun their presentation to analyze for alternative interpretations even though she said, “Wes Moore’s life is on the line here. We need to know what really happened that day.” For example, she wanted them to note which person had carried which weapons. It was only Wes’s brother Tony who fired a gun and later confessed to the shooting, yet all four defendants were convicted of murder. One of the most academically successful students, Justin, said, “Why we doin’ this again? He’s guilty.” His apparent frustration caught the mood of a group ready to share ideas but not rethink them.

It is important to note Aaron’s participation. He had only marginally talked with the others in the group he had been assigned to and had opted out of their presentation. However, at this moment, he stepped in when Marquis asked for someone to show how during the robbery people in the store had raised their hands when a gun was pointed at them. He was clearly engaged and prepared to respond to a request to participate.

**Dialogue About an Oppressive Status Quo**

Megan had chosen the book not only because she thought the students would identify with events in the lives of many of the characters (which they did), but also because the narrative shows that characters in challenging or even dangerous situations always have choices. She did not want to present the two life stories dichotomously, but rather, working collaboratively with the students, she hoped they would critically inquire into their understanding of some of the complexities of the social lives of the characters and consider how there are always alternative possible outcomes for our actions and reactions. That did begin to happen with the event dramatized in the fourth session shown in Figure 1.

The group engaged in some passionate sharing about the actions and responsibilities of both parents and children in a dramatized crisis in relation to an oppressive status quo that many lived within their everyday lives: the effect of drug dealing in the neighborhood on the lives of families.

Some were beginning to dialogue, which for Bakhtin is not just talk: “To live means to participate in [open-ended] dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth (cited in Morson and Emerson 1990, 61). Dialogue is not people making individual monologic statements of their opinions but rather forming understanding in response to another’s ideas. At the same time, dialogue neither parrots the view of teacher or text nor seeks consensus. Nikulin (1998), applying Bakhtin’s ideas, contrasts polyphonic dialogue with Platonic dialogue, dominant in most classroom discourse, where “many voices display one idea.” As he puts it, “in polyphonic dialogue every voice presents its own unique idea [and] multiple voices do not try to reach a synthesis” (393–4). Similarly, DePalma (2010) envisions a “polyphonic classroom” as “a discursive space into which multiple voices are invited . . . to engage each other in dialogue” (437).
Dramatic Inquiry and Anti-Oppressive Teaching

Dramatic performance was central to providing a focus for some polyphonic dialogue as young people interpreted exchanges, evaluated reactions, and responded to others’ ideas as the following example illustrates.

When Megan introduced the extract telling how Wes’s mother discovered drugs in his room, rather than read the entire page, she paused several times to ask questions so that the group could consider the mother’s possible reaction. Taking a central role, Yolanda made suggestions that were each dramatized: going to a counselor, calling the police, and confronting her son. Megan stepped in briefly as the counselor. Then Marquis embodied the viewpoint of a police officer arriving at the door to meet Yolanda as the mother.

The dialogue around whether or not to inform the police raised several issues: Was Wes taking drugs as well as dealing? Might the police take the drugs illegally? What could happen to Wes? From the corner, Aaron commented, “If he has a conviction on his permanent record, he’ll not be able to get a job.” He was not the only person to talk without being heard, but significantly for him, when Megan insisted on quiet and asked Aaron to repeat what he had said, his comment was heard and acknowledged with both disagreement and affirmation by others in the group. Aaron moved from making a monologic statement to being more of a participant in the dialogue. After dramatizing the encounter, Yolanda showed that she had both heard Aaron and had changed her mind. Why has she decided not to call the police? “Because I don’t want that on the record. Bad things happen in prison.”

Marquis, as Wes, and Yolanda, as his mother, then dramatized how she might have confronted Wes after flushing the drugs down the toilet. Further dialogue among the group was initiated by Vote from Your Seat (sit if you disagree, stand if you agree, raise your hands if you really agree); this is a strategy especially effective at making similarities and differences in interpretation more apparent.

MEGAN: So why would this get him [Wes] so angry? Why are you all standing?
YOLANDA: Because of all that money.
MARQUIS: She threw $4,000 away.
JOHN: An older dude got some money.
MEGAN: Why would that put someone in danger?
MARQUIS: He got to pay $4,000 back, and how he gonna do that without sellin’ the drugs? He can’t go back to the same person to get drugs.
MEGAN: So what does that mean for Wes?
MARQUIS: That mean she done put his whole family in danger?
MEGAN: Why is his life in danger?
STEVEN: (with several others in agreement) Because he owes the money?
JOHN: Drug dealer. She gonna see him dead.
MARQUIS: She cry, “Oh my baby.”
MEGAN: OK, right, so this is very serious.
SHERRI: Hey, Marquis, he could a blamed it on his brother [Tony].
MARTIN: She couldn’t call the cops on him.

(Five minutes later, after a dramatic performance with John, as Wes)

MEGAN: So what does all this tell us about Mary [his mother]?
YOLANDA: She has a backbone. She stands up for herself.
MARQUIS: She’s standing up. She’s showing she’s not scared of him.
MEGAN: What else does it say about Mary?
YOLANDA: She’s a devoted mother. Like she wants to see her kids in a better place than they are now.
MEGAN: What do you think she wants for her son in the future?
MONA: To have his own thing, not selling drugs.
JOHN: Stop him from bein like Tony [his brother]. She can’t stop that but she can try to stop him bein on the path of Tony. Try her best.
MEGAN: Could anyone show us what she might want for Wes in the future?
THERESA: Have a job.
TRAYVON: In college, educated.
JOHN: Have more than Tony.
MAURICE (walking): Walk across stage with this in his hand. Diploma, cause he’s graduating high school. Hi, mom!
MEGAN: Of course he doesn’t actually make it through high school. He doesn’t graduate. But he does goes through something called Job Corps. He becomes a carpenter so he could build things.

There was no moralizing consensus, but that was the point. The dramatic inquiry had opened up space for some polyphonic dialogue about a topic that previously had not been discussed in the classroom. Though the verbal exchange was dominated by a few of the students, all had the potential space to explore and consider different possible outcomes.

One way in which a deeper culturally oppressive status quo was evident in the group was that nearly all of the students believed that if Wes Moore had been found guilty then he had to be guilty. His story of mistaken identity did not go far with the students as they talked about the robbery after dramatizing it even when Marquis, as Wes, was hot-seated and explained how the DNA evidence could have been misinterpreted. The shared viewpoint was very apparent when Megan asked people to stand on a continuum on the second day. It was unaffected when Megan told them that he should have been acquitted if the jury had “reasonable doubt” or that proportionally more people of color are convicted than white people. All who had participated had stood at the guilty end, except Marquis. Crystal was not present. Aaron had not stood up.

A Crisis as an Event

I have found Bakhtin’s (1984) understanding of events very useful for comparing these two examples of the young people’s experiences of crisis. For Bakhtin, the “eventness” of a live event is experiencing from more than one viewpoint, “played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses” (1984, 88). In the reenactment of the robbery, the young people did not experience a meeting of more than one consciousness. Their experience was more monologic than dialogic: They were stuck in a single viewpoint despite the multiple consciousnesses being represented. Though characters in the robbery had conflicting viewpoints, the students did not. For them, there was a single way to interpret the robbery: They were showing what Wes had done to be found guilty.

In contrast, meaning was more open in the drugs event. Students could move around between social positions. Some embodied or briefly thought-tacked the mother or Wes. Some did both and some responded to the viewpoint of a police officer.

Additionally, for Bakhtin, there is “presentness” in a live event: “time is open and each moment has multiple possibilities . . . the potential to lead in many directions” (Morson and Emerson 1990, 46–7). Similarly, as Susanne Langer (1953) puts it, events are dramatic because, “only a present filled with its own future is really dramatic” (306).
As they dramatized Wes meeting his mother, there were multiple possible outcomes. All experienced that both mother and son had choices over what to say and do.

In contrast, in the dramatic performance of the robbery, the young people assumed there was only one outcome: the guilty verdict that had been handed down. For Megan’s students who already believed Wes was guilty, the dramatization of the robbery was merely a reenactment rather than a dramatic encounter for a jury filled with the tension of what might have happened. Their dramatic role or frame made no difference, nor did asking a direct question as Megan did: “Could the fact that Wes was black have made a difference to the jury?” With the exception of one of the students, none took up a critical perspective, even when Megan showed her support for a critique of the criminal justice system.

It was not until the last day of my initial visit to the classroom that the students experienced a crisis in relation to the conviction. Five minutes before the end of the block, Megan introduced an event, not in the story of Wes Moore, but one that was experienced as a conflicting perspective on the Wes Moore guilty verdict.

On the day of the twentieth anniversary of the beginning of the riots following the acquittal of the four Los Angeles police officers charged with assault and the use of excessive force in the beating of Rodney King, five minutes before the bell, Megan showed a YouTube video clip. She asked the students, “Do you think the police officers are guilty of using excessive force?” The class was unanimous in giving an affirmative response, and some were visibly shocked when she told them the outcome of the not-guilty verdict by the jury, which was all white except for one Latino and one Asian American. A few students were talking about the video as they exited the classroom.

The following day, when I was not present, Megan led a discussion on whether the fact that Wes was black could have influenced the jury. Was race a factor? She returned to the talk about the Rodney King beating, and she supported those students who wanted to dramatize that event. Megan analyzed what happened and its significance for Aaron:

Aaron came into the center of the group for the first time. We were talking about race and whether it might have something to do with Wes being in jail. Several of the boys wanted to talk about the video we’d seen. They said if Rodney King had been white and the cops black, the outcome would have been different. They really wanted to dramatize the beating. Four boys stood up to be the cops and they turned to Aaron saying, “You can be Rodney King because you’re white.” Aaron literally jumped up and said, “OK, I’ll do it.” I said, “Remember we’re just acting,” because I knew it could get kind of violent, and they said, “Oh Ms. Ballinger, we know, we’re not going to hurt him.” Aaron kinda looked back at them and said, “I trust them . . . I think,” and they acted out the scene. Like on the video, at the end, they like pretended he was on the ground and they were like punching him and kicking him. It was pretty intense. And John kinda helped him up and Aaron shoved him a little and said, “You got me there,” and John said, “Oh, I’m sorry man, I’m sorry.” They were fine. I realized that it was kind of a playful thing like between friends. And then Justin, who had been the person most convinced that Wes was “obviously” guilty, was clearly rethinking. He turned to one of the others and said if Wes had been white, the outcome could have been different. It was great.

For Bakhtin, this encounter had “eventness” for the group because now they had entered into a second consciousness (“the jury might have been wrong”), where previously there
had been one viewpoint (“he’s guilty”). The encounter also had “presentness” because another outcome was now possible (acquittal).

At the same time, a subtle transformation was taking place of which we had both been unaware. For the first time, leaders in the group needed Aaron and positioned him as central. In an encounter in which race was a central issue, his difference in being white had been acknowledged and framed as important for their dramatic performance: They needed him and so invited him in.

Megan had been sensitive to Aaron’s feelings at the time but only later realized the significance of this event for his position in the group. Talking about the event two weeks later, she stressed, as we looked at the photograph I had taken that is shown as Figure 2:

I recognized that Aaron had been in a very vulnerable physical position. I now realize he had finally been invited in to participate. He had joined in eagerly and had been at the center of the dramatic performance. From then on, he consistently started to put his chair into the circle and stayed in the circle the whole period. He became another person in the group.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored three dimensions to anti-oppressive teaching through dramatic inquiry.

First, antioppressive teaching is more complex than it might seem even when we know the oppression we want to challenge. Dramatic inquiry opens up the possibility for young people to shift among viewpoints by embodying the consciousness of different characters and by participating in dialogue to interpret a dramatized crisis. In doing so, a status-quo oppressive practice may be opened up to exploratory meaning making by the group. Yet, teaching to create an experience for participants of the dialogic meeting of consciousnesses is more subtle than just dramatizing conflict. I may believe that I am challenging the status quo by inquiring into a dramatization of an event when I may actually be reifying it for the students. Considering the “eventness” and “presentness” of an event is one way of guarding against dramatizing monologue.

Second, some status-quo oppressive practices are visible to me while others are not. For example, like Megan, I regard extreme individuality in schooling as oppressive. I work actively at challenging it by building community and working as an ensemble. However, at the same time, I need to realize that there are oppressive practices that may remain invisible to me, like the self-imposed exclusion of certain students.

Cultivating a norm of inclusion through negotiating principles of equality and working to create openness in the classroom community to include others and their viewpoints may actually be a more effective long-term approach to challenge a status-quo exclusion of individuals than any attempt to try to force people to work together. On the one hand, students have to invite one another into their social spaces, but on the other, they have to want to enter. Dramatic inquiry is a tool for creating more fluid socially imagined and real spaces grounded in ensemble practices that continually invite participation by all.

Finally, as a teacher, I must be ready to face an unexpected crisis in my teaching. As Megan’s insights suggest, being open to how students keep revealing themselves in the moment may be the best way to prepare. As Megan put it, “It’s hard to teach in this way, but it’s worth it. I would never have wanted to stay as the teacher I was, going into my own classroom. Teaching is a journey and I’m looking forward to where I end up next year.”
References


