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Dramatic Inquiry

Imagining and Enacting Life from Multiple Perspectives

The big shift is to move from holding the information and doling it out like charity to creating the circumstances where it is imperative to inquire, search out, and interrogate the information we locate. If at present it isn’t possible to merge the work of adults and the work of students because we don’t value the contribution young children can bring to cultural development of the world’s good, we can rely on proven drama systems to create “the mirror to nature” and harness, through identification and empathy, the life knowledge which children will bring generously to meet us half-way.

—Dorothy Heathcote, Real Players, foreword, p. xii

In this chapter, we explore how teachers can use dramatic inquiry to extend a critical inquiry-based approach to literacy learning. Whereas much of teacher-mediated, improvised classroom drama’s (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) potential as a tool for literacy learning has been documented (Heath & Wolf, 2005; Schneider, Crumpler, & Rogers, 2007; Wagner, 1998), how it can contextualize inquiry-based dialogic curricular approaches has only begun to be recorded and theorized (Edmiston, 1998; Edmiston & Enciso, 2003), and its potential for extending student agency and shaping identities has only recently been considered (Edmiston, 2008).

Dramatic inquiry begins when adults participate in, and mediate, collaborative activities in the overlapping spaces of young people’s inquiries and their dramatic improvisation. People of all ages may engage in the playful improvisation of dramatic inquiry. Dorothy Heathcote, who pioneered this approach, stressed the ubiquity and simplicity of dramatic activities: “the ability of humans to ‘become somebody else,’ to ‘see how it feels’... to ‘put yourself in my shoes’ is a capacity that humans employ naturally...
and intuitively all their lives" (1984, p. 54). Dramatic inquiry harnesses that imaginative ability in order to deepen and extend students' inquiries. The following recent examples all come from schools in central Ohio:

- In a ninth-grade high school urban English classroom, students spoke as if on the telephone with their congressional representative, represented by Brian, to begin to explore their inquiry question: What might be done to help refugees in Darfur. Later, they deepened inquiries as they shifted perspective to imagine they were journalists, incognito, entering Sudan to document events and make them public.

- In a sixth-grade classroom in a Catholic school, young people explored why settlers and native people had not shared the land in Ohio 200 years previously. As if they were settlers, militia, and indigenous people, they improvised interactions and made decisions about attacks, possible retaliation, and resettlement as Brian mediated their collaborative movement among, and interpretation of, different perspectives on historical events referred to only in passing in their social studies textbook.

- In a fourth-grade classroom at an arts lottery urban school, African American and European American children imagined they were with Bessie Coleman, the first Black female aviator, when they encountered Brian, who blocked their way as if he were the White owner of a flight school in the 1920s; later they discussed how people then and now can act in the face of discrimination.

In this chapter we use examples from two suburban central Ohio settings: a fifth-grade classroom in an elementary school, and two first-grade classrooms in New Albany K–1 School. The use of examples from first-grade classrooms in a book with a grade 5–12 audience might seem surprising. However, because Brian co-taught over a school year in those classrooms, those examples illustrate how identities and agency can shift when dramatic inquiry is used over longer periods of time to shape classroom spaces.

We use examples from these classrooms to illustrate the significance for students' agency and identity formation when adults create with young people imagined spaces for inquiry via dramatic improvisation. First, we illustrate how young people identify with an emerging community of literacy practices in which students who improvise in playful imagined spaces can become more competent at collaboratively using extensive multimodal literacy tools. Second, we demonstrate how adult mediation of dramatic inquiry
activities, in particular positioning students as competent and capable in dramatic performances, are tools that affect classroom power relationships, the construction of more dialogic understandings, and the identities of both young people and teachers.

**DRAMATIC INQUIRY AS A LITERACY TOOL-OF-TOOLS**

Because people experience the spaces of dramatic inquiry as if they were real, we argue that dramatic inquiry is not a single literacy tool but rather, like language itself, is an educational "tool of tools" (Cole, 1996). Teachers can use the multiple intersecting tools of dramatic inquiry to transform classrooms into spaces for literacy learning and teaching that not only create opportunities for composing and interpreting texts but also extend critical inquiry, foster students' agency, and promote development of their perspectives.

During the 2007–08 school year Janie Sammons and Trish Russell regularly used the critical literacy tools of dramatic inquiry. The young people in Janie's and Trish's classes imagined that they had the responsibility for running travel agencies. Toward the end of the year, in Janie's classroom, as the first-grade children planned an imagined trip to Rwanda for conservationists as if they were members of the Extreme Adventures Travel Agency, at different times they considered how to greet people from another culture, how people there lived, and how they could be assisted to reduce their environmental impact and thus better protect local mountain gorillas.

Meanwhile, inquiries in Trish's class focused on vacations on the ocean off the coast of Florida. After carefully planning successful and safe trips, as if they were members of Exciting Water Adventures, to "swim with dolphins," the first graders critiqued adult decisions as they invented what happened to an injured client when another company, Scuba Adventures, had not been very safety-conscious.

In Sarah Higgins's classroom 3 years previously over a 90-minute period, fifth-grade students adopted the perspectives of sculptors creating a sculpture to pose a critical inquiry question: From whose perspectives should the Thanksgiving story be told? The young people read and critiqued accounts from different viewpoints both on paper and as represented by visiting adults depicting historical people. As they wrote, sketched, and presented ideas, while participating in heated discussions, the young people reexamined some of their prior assumptions about Thanksgiving.

For Janie, using dramatic inquiry revitalized students' involvement in an annual schoolwide "Partners in Conservation" event planned for May
2008. As Janie noted, “For the first time the children cared about, had an understanding of why we were involved in this project, and took on responsibility. They didn’t want to stop working on it.” Presenters from the local zoo would annually visit classrooms in this suburban school to tell the mostly affluent children about the zoo’s involvement in a Rwandan project. As students they normally had little to do beyond listen as they were informed about how money gathered at fund-raisers would be used to purchase and deliver goats, stoves, and bicycles to East Africa. But this year was different. They enacted the presentations of the goats that would provide milk and could forage in the forest, unlike cattle, which need pasture in cleared land; they pretended to cook as they drew pictures of the stoves that burn less fuel than open fires, reducing the need for wood that they imagined gathering from the forest; and some imagined riding on rough terrain the bicycles that provide transportation and relaxed the pressure to migrate to cities or poach in the protected forest.

The following fieldnotes, written toward the end of the year and after several weeks working on the Partners in Conservation project, illustrate how after months of dramatic inquiry activities the classroom had been transformed into a space where students, assisted by adults, were actively and collaboratively making meaning as they moved back and forth between discussion and dramatic improvisation. These young children both played and performed as they dramatically explored questions about their relationship with Rwanda.

The students sit with Brian to read an illustrated children’s book about Swahili, one of the official languages of Rwanda: Jambo Means Hello (Feelings, 1992) is an A-Z book with English commentary. Talking as if he too is a travel agent, Brian raises questions about what words they might use on their Rwandan trip and how they might greet people respectfully. As they listen, several boys who had been making drums collaboratively continue to work on them using rubber bands, cloth, and containers. Then, to illustrate the Swahili word for drum, Brian asks the boys to play as the other children respond with great enthusiasm. He wonders if the people in Rwanda might like to hear them playing their own drums; the children think so. Soon, many more children are making and playing drums and other instruments and inventing names for their musical creations. Some children return to the book for Swahili words that they adapt. Colin retrieves a previously written story and begins to revise it while some consult books previously gathered by the classroom teacher. Some cluster round a visiting teacher’s laptop...
looking for information about Rwanda. Others, assisted by Janie and
other visiting adults in the classroom, try out possible ways of cross-
cultural greeting including dance and singing while John creates a
surveillance camera to check for the poachers they knew could be in
the area. Children then gather to present their ideas to one another, and
to the three visiting teachers, as all engage in discussion around the
inquiry question: How should we greet people in Rwanda?

Dramatic inquiry dramatizes whole-class inquiries about life. The above
example illustrates our use of the term dramatic inquiry: embodied, collabor-
ative, interactive, and sequenced improvised activities that young people
engage in alongside adults as they explore questions about a topic from mul-
tiple viewpoints by creating, experiencing, representing, and interpreting so-
cially imagined events as if they are actually happening here and now. Like the
improvised interactions in spontaneous dramatic play and unscripted staged
dramatic performances, but unlike the many largely prescribed individualized
events in young people’s lives in school, the activities of dramatic inquiry both
create and then occur in socially imagined spaces that resemble everyday life
experiences. At the same time, forming depicted events in dramatic inquiry
creates significance in the sense that “all the ideas embodied . . . are considered
by the group to be relevant” (Heathcote, 1984, p. 55).

In Trish Russell’s classroom the students reconsidered “safety” as they
imagined the consequences of the unsafe practices of Scuba Adventures.
Trish and Brian led adult-mediated whole-group dramatic playing, with
children taking turns as if they were attacking as, and being attacked by,
sharks and other dangerous sea creatures the children had researched. With
much laughter they delighted at shifting informally into brief collaborative
dramatic performances that showed what could have happened as swimmers
were overpowered by attacking creatures.

With adult assistance the children formed their ideas: everything shown
was relevant to their ongoing inquiry into how to be safe. Older students
could have jumped straight into shaping and showing the still images that
Trish captured on digital photographs as the younger children held a pose
of “the most dangerous moments” in the stories they invented. Having
printed out the images, each student then used markers to draw individually
imagined events around each photograph. And after Trish talked with the
children-as-reporters, each interpreted events as they wrote an accompanying
story as if retold by a reporter for the local newspaper.

In Sarah Higgins’s fifth-grade classroom, imagining they were sculptors
designing a Thanksgiving commemorative monument, the students took up
a critical inquiry stance as they encountered, explored, dramatized, and critiqued different perspectives on the 1620 historical events. Sarah began by reading them a letter as if from a federal group, the National Monument Association, written to a group of sculptors who had been commissioned to design a monument commemorating Thanksgiving. Like the younger students who had eagerly imagined they had the responsibility of travel agents, these older students created and entered an imagined space as if they were adult designers with expertise. The first graders had been eager to move and interact as if they were travel agents as well as villagers and gorillas in Rwanda or sharks and swimmers in the ocean; during their short introduction to the pedagogy of dramatic inquiry, the fifth graders more gradually interacted in imagined spaces. Initially, they talked with Sarah as a fellow sculptor, and all participated in reading a letter and in response made and then shared publicly their drawings of possible designs. Later, they gained new perspectives by talking with visiting adults who dramatized their historical research by performing as if they were the historical Plymouth governor, Edward Winslow, and the indigenous leaders, Squanto and Massasoit. Finally, they imagined that they were modern-day Wampanoag people debating whether to celebrate Thanksgiving or participate in the National Day of Mourning.

IMAGINED-AND-REAL SPACES

Because people create spaces as they interact, Leander and Sheehy (2004) have argued that classroom literacy learning should be “spatialized.” Lefebvre (1991) theorized that life is lived, experienced, and understood in socially produced, but dynamically changing, “real-and-imagined spaces” that have histories and futures as well as present geographies. Everyday life is imagined in the sense that social and cultural norms have no objective physical reality but have been, and continue to be, socially constructed and conceptualized in mental images that are made visible in predictable social interactions. What was, and is, imagined acquires a reality for people when they participate in social practices that they accept as how people ought to act in particular situations, for example how one person greets another in a particular time and place.

We argue that dramatic inquiry inverts the experience of everyday life by creating social “imagined-and-real spaces” for the purposes of critical and dialogic inquiry. In dramatic inquiry, socially imagined events and possibilities become visible in embodied action in a social space that is experienced
by participants as if it is actually elsewhere: in a travel agency, in Rwanda, or in Plymouth in 1620. Additionally, social relationships and hierarchies may be playfully shaped and changed in ways that could not actually happen in everyday life, as people pretend to act as if they are other persons. Students' participation over time in activities in the spaces of dramatic inquiry creates a fictionalized "drama world" (O'Neill, 1995) that overlaps with the everyday classroom world. Inverting the experience of the everyday, in dramatic inquiry what is socially imagined in the moment is foregrounded while everyday reality is backgrounded. In ways similar to when young children engage in spontaneous dramatic play, as Vygotsky (1967) realized, the symbolic meaning of people's social actions and any objects they use as multimodal tools become more important than the actual actions and objects themselves. This reversal is significant because, as Vygotsky stressed, "play leads development": in the enacted playful social imagination of dramatic inquiry, children learn in meaningful situations how to use language and other tools, to create abstracted symbolic meaning, for example, the meanings of greeting in different settings are abstractions situated in and formed from particular concrete situations.

By extension, when people of any age engage in the dramatic improvisation of dramatic inquiry, they learn to use and understand more of the conceptual meaning created by multimodal literacy tools in diverse but particular social and cultural situations. In Janie's classroom, adults as well as children thought about the intercultural dimensions of communication and about Rwanda. As Janie noted, "It was so much fun dancing with the girls, but I'd not really thought about how a dance might be a great thing to do to connect with people in another country until I joined in and then talked about it when we shared with everyone." In the spaces of dramatic inquiry activities, to paraphrase Soja (1996), physical, mental, emotional, and social tools are seen as simultaneously imagined and real, concrete and abstract material and metaphorical. Janie was adamant that for her students just abstractly talking about the Rwandan project had been neither engaging nor educational the previous year. Since the children had already been imagining that they were travel agents as if at a planning meeting, Janie and Brian suggested to them-as-travel-agents, "How about we take on a new project?" The interest of the class in planning a trip to Rwanda for conservationists was aroused as they watched, on the classroom smartboard, video clips from the Internet showing local farmers at work, deforestation, and images of the national park where mountain gorillas live. The smartboard presentation was made by Camille Cushman, a graduate student participant-observer, and facilitated by Brian. By making the inter-
active presentation as if she were one of the travel agents’ potential clients (a person who had just returned from Rwanda, who wanted us as travel agents to plan a trip for the group from the Partners in Conservation project she had agreed to lead), Camille could give focused and personal responses that both gave information and raised newly contextualized professional questions among the young people: Why had people cut down trees? Did gorillas hide? Would the rangers use their guns to shoot people? Inquiry questions such as these focused the adult-assisted children’s improvisations that followed.

**DRAMATIC IMPROVISATION**

In dramatic inquiry, improvisation comes to the fore, as it does in the online role-play activities we describe in Chapter 7. As Robinson (2001) characterizes it, improvisation is creative “applied imagination” rather than flights of fancy, for example applied toward appropriate use of language and movement when participating in particular social situations. In online role-play young people learn literacy by improvised participation in the engaging imagined spaces of a virtual game world using a class blog or social networking site as described in Chapter 7. In dramatic inquiry young people, along with participating adults, similarly improvise in imagined spaces, but they do so by moving and interacting as if they are actually in newly imagined scenarios that may both tap into students’ interests, knowledge, and cultural resources as well as meet teachers’ particular literacy goals. For example, the first-grade students in Janie’s classroom, working alongside supportive adults who asked questions and pressed for new possibilities, used their prior knowledge of the social practices of greeting, online information from the Web and books about Rwanda, as well as their prior writing, to raise questions and explore possibilities about how to greet people in Rwanda as they moved, talked, read, wrote, and made music to explore possible respectful cross-cultural greetings: Would a handshake be appropriate? A smile? Gifts? A story? What sort of music and dance?

Though all dramatic improvisation is collaborative and unscripted, some dramatic inquiry activities focus more on the shared experience of participating in imagined-and-real social practices, while other activities are more concerned with some people performing ideas to communicate with an imagined audience. Both are significant from a literacy learning viewpoint: literacy is learned both by participating in the literacy practices of a community and by using language to create texts to communicate with
others. Dramatic improvisation that is mostly about imaginatively experiencing other people's social practices is called dramatic playing (e.g., moving as if we were gorillas foraging in a forest, travel agents consulting maps to plan trips, or sculptors using clay to design a monument). Improvisation that is mostly about the presentation and interpretation of events from the imagined lives of other people is a dramatic performance (e.g., a conservationist showing and commenting on a slide show about gorilla habitats to travel agents, agents planning and making a phone call to a client, or sculptors sharing and explaining a design with colleagues). Unlike stage performers, who expect applause, but like everyday life, the audience for a dramatic inquiry performance is not external to the group (Bolton, 1999).

Rather than being different types of activity, dramatic play and dramatic performance can be considered different objectives of activities that can be placed on a dramatic improvisation continuum depending on the extent of people's embodied movement as if acting as other people in an imagined space. At one end of the continuum lies the sort of open-ended active playful movement that most young children engage in spontaneously, that many actors employ in rehearsals, but that takes most older students and adults longer to become comfortable with. Toward the middle lies more focused creations, for example, brief still images in a tableau. At the other end of the continuum lie informal conversations where people only minimally use their bodies to represent other people; these are the sorts of activities that older school students and adults initially tend to find most comfortable. All improvised activities are playful when people imagine they are elsewhere, and all become performances when there is a presentation that is interpreted by watchers.

In Sarah's fifth-grade classroom the students were comfortable with participation that required only minimal embodiment in imagined times and places. Though the students' dramatic improvisations were more conversational than physically embodied, they were still both playful and performative. Sarah initially performed as a sculptor reading a letter to promote a conversation with the students as sculptors focused on the question of from whose perspectives the Thanksgiving story should be told. Later, visiting graduate students gave information and answered questions as if they were paintings of historical characters that came alive so that the students could interact with them. In doing so, they could interpret both as themselves and later as if they were contemporary Wampanoag people at a council meeting as they considered whether to celebrate Thanksgiving or participate in the National Day of Mourning.

The young children in Janie's classroom were both generally more active and more experienced using the tools of dramatic inquiry. Rather
than just use talk to create a shared understanding of the class project, the children readily engaged in active playful improvisation that dramatized, applied, and extended information they had gained from books and the Web. Camille, Janie, and Brian pretended with the children to be walking in a forest. After dimming the lights and moving the tables and chairs, they made forest sounds together and imagined seeing, hearing, and briefly being animals and plants. And then, to explore the consequences of poaching, as they talked about a construction paper representation of an alert trap that poachers used to catch gorillas, Brian moved into a brief performance. Whereas the historical characters in Sarah’s classroom had been mostly static as they were interviewed, Brian narrated a story as he moved his arm along the carpet to enact a baby gorilla’s movement through the forest and its hand being caught when it stepped on a hidden trap. This activity was embedded into an ongoing discussion about the project. As travel agents, the children’s interpretation and response to the enacted story was clear; they wanted to save the gorillas and organize an imagined trip to Rwanda. The students were eager to participate in interviews during additional informal presentations by Camille (as the returned conservationist), as well as by Janie and Brian (as representatives from the zoo). Soon groups were planning, creating, and sharing illustrated plans that some tried out in dramatic play. Most drew, and with adult direction, informally shared with others about how they would move through the forest and bring goats, stoves, and bicycles to the local people.

AGENCY IN DRAMATIC INQUIRY

People enact agency in the improvisation of dramatic inquiry that would be difficult or impossible to experience or maintain in their everyday lives. As they dramatize struggling with shared objectives, the multimodal literacy tools available to students are extended in socially imagined spaces.

In 90 minutes the students in Sarah Higgins’s fifth-grade classroom used drawings; their responses to adults’ dramatic performances; limited movement; and their talk in the imagined-and-real spaces of sculptors, the historical time of 1620, and a meeting of contemporary Native Americans. From multiple perspectives, the students explored the question of whether to celebrate or mourn Thanksgiving. Though this was the first time she had used dramatic inquiry with her students, Sarah recognized its power to extend student agency.
It was amazing. Students who, in the everyday classroom, were shy and hesitant to speak, were able to take up positions and voice their ideas confidently. Nick was a particularly shy student who rarely spoke up in class and did not like to draw attention to himself. When they were imagining that they were Wampanoag council members, Nick spoke up and challenged his classmates to reconsider their previous unquestioned assumption that all Americans should celebrate Thanksgiving apparent in their initial stereotypical drawings of Indians and Pilgrims sharing turkey: “They [the Pilgrims] were probably glad they destroyed us. They’re probably not going to care. I think what we should do is not celebrate Thanksgiving and have our own version of Thanksgiving.”

Over several months, the children in Janie Sammons’s first-grade classroom had opportunities to extend their agency in dramatic improvisation. Using a range of literacy tools that included images and ideas from adults, books, and the Internet, as well as drawings, maps, writing, movements, sounds, and interactions, they transformed the everyday classroom not only into a travel agency where they could explore how to keep people safe in extreme situations but also into other imagined-and-real spaces that included the multifaceted landscape in Rwanda. Over time, there were opportunities for all students to extend their agency. John was perceived to be a student who often engaged in parallel play and whose ideas were discounted. His agency, and how his peers saw him, was transformed when he stood on a chair to use the surveillance camera he had made so that people could watch for poachers. Janie commented:

When we started showing the camera and what was happening down there everyone in the room stopped doing what they were doing. Even though they were really interested in that, they then saw John standing on that chair pretending he had the camera looking down. I remember all the dancers had stopped and they were all looking. He was the king for a moment; he was hardly ever the king.

The students’ agency over time created socially imagined worlds that transformed how they acted every day. Because the children agreed that adult travel agents would not have meetings controlled by a single adult where they would raise hands, new collaborative ways of listening and building on ideas were negotiated, for example passing round a “talking stick” and taking turns to draw ideas on the smartboard.
CRITICAL, DIALOGIC, DRAMATIC INQUIRY

Dramatic inquiry can create spaces where young people’s agency to act is confronted with actions and voices coming from viewpoints they had not previously considered.

At one point in the Rwandan project, the children hid from and then encountered Brian-as-a-poacher, setting a trap. He justified his action in an accompanying narrative about his hungry family and how he would make more money from selling a gorilla than he could make in a year as a farmer. The children challenged this belief as they physically surrounded Brian. When one of the children said, “Traps kill gorillas. They have a right to live, too,” the other children were in agreement, though one added quietly, “But he needs to feed his family.” In the dramatic improvisation the young people were critically engaged with a complex problem they would never actually encounter that also challenged their initial assumption that no one should kill a gorilla.

Brian’s adult mediation created a space that for some became more dialogic as well as critical: the embodied ideas young people defined in the poacher space were placed in dialogue with understanding they had created in the prior space of the baby gorillas that needed saving from the traps. The understanding created in the exchange was more dialogic for children who had projected into and considered action from both viewpoints (Bakhtin, 1981). With older students, this project could have dialogically critiqued potentially colonizing attitudes of Western “help,” made visible the colonial roots of the region’s genocide, and exposed non-African economic demands that contribute to central African environmental degradation.

Adult-mediated activities in the spaces of dramatic inquiry over time promoted more dialogic conceptual explorations. For example, one of the agreed principles of the travel agency arose from a discussion about what the word “extreme” meant in the contexts of all the possible trips they might provide. It was agreed that though vacations could feel dangerous and involve sensible risks, they would always be “fun and safe.” What “safety” meant then became one of the ongoing inquiry questions that had no easy answers but was explored in different contexts: designing movable cages for people to keep them safe from jaguars; safety for gorillas and people in the presence of traps; and explaining to conservationists what to do in the forest because there might be poachers.

The Rwandan project was critical inquiry focused on promoting social justice for both gorillas and local people. In previous years its focus had
been mostly information-gathering. In Sarah Higgins’s fifth-grade classroom, Thanksgiving inquiry was initially focused by a critical question: From whose perspectives should the story be told? After reading and then encountering and engaging in dialogue with viewpoints from 1620, the students all agreed that indigenous perspectives had to be included. Sarah now posed a more difficult question: Should we continue to celebrate Thanksgiving as we have always done, or like many contemporary indigenous and nonindigenous people, should we participate in the National Day of Mourning? The students-as-contemporary-Wampanoags were asked to reinterpret their previous stereotypical drawings. Sarah noted that Xavier’s ideas made a difference.

In the imagined space Xavier’s contributions were very relevant, and many moved the class from just imagining different perspectives to critical dialogue that challenged stereotypes and misconceptions of the traditional Thanksgiving story. Imagining that he was a contemporary Wampanoag, Xavier was passionate in declaring that indigenous people and the pilgrims were not friends who sat down to have dinner. His comments opened up a critical discussion about whether the past should dictate our actions in the present.

As the students-as-sculptors revised their initial stereotypical sketches, they became both more dialogic and critical.

_Mary_: I can’t decide what to make the sculpture look like. Only because if we do the sculpture how the Indians want it, then it won’t represent how we do it. And if we do how we want it then the Indians will be mad.

_Steve_: I think the sculpture should have four sides, one with the first Thanksgiving, one with an Indian and a Pilgrim with half of the treaty, one with a plaque and one with modern Thanksgiving.

_Xavier_: I would show a sculpture of a peace treaty but behind the sculpture a war scene.

Over time, if these fifth-grade students had become as comfortable using the multimodal tools of dramatic inquiry as the first graders, they could have engaged in a more extensive dialogic exploration. For example, in creating, interpreting, and revising small- and whole-group still images of sculpture designs, the students could have taken up and engaged in dialogue from multiple viewpoints across time and space.
DRAMATIC INQUIRY IS A LITERACY OF POSSIBILITIES

Karen Wohlwend (2008) convincingly argues that dramatic play is a multimodal “literacy of possibilities” that “expands meanings in practices, materials, and spaces.” Both play and performance in dramatic inquiry are highly significant for learning, and literacy learning in particular, because young people are learning social practices using tools that are in advance of what they would or could use in everyday life. As Vygotsky (1967) put it, in play it is as if people are “a head taller”: they may have the authority to use a phone or fly a plane combined with the responsibility to interview a client or write a report. As the first-grade children invented their travel agency, they created agendas and procedures for team meetings and ways of speaking on the phone and interviewing clients, and they planned and shared countless imagined ideas in action, online, and on paper.

When people play they can try out and perform new identities, or as Marcus and Nurius (1986) might word it, have the agency to act as other “possible selves” in imagined spaces. In dramatic inquiry students can experiment with alternative identifications that are foregrounded over everyday identities. In dramatic inquiry young people are no longer tied to established student identities but can participate in collaborative community practices as other possible selves trying out different identities. Possible selves and identities will be shaped by the “epistemic frame” (Shaffer, 2006) of whatever “enterprise” of expertise (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) they collectively imagine running: sculptors, travel agents, and so on. As Shaffer (2006) puts it, the shared epistemic frame provides “the ways of knowing, of deciding what is worth knowing, and of adding to the collective body of knowledge and understanding of a community of practice.”

The children in first grade had months to become more competent and knowledgeable participants in the imagined-and-real communities that developed. In addition to travel agencies, the young people in the SAIL classrooms created communities of scuba divers, hospitals, Nocturnal Wildlife Park Rangers, the helpers who helped Goldilocks, Humpty Dumpty, and a fishing community on a tropical island damaged in a hurricane. Their identities could change as they repeatedly took on responsibilities in these imagined-and-real communities. As Janie put it: “You can expect more out of them and they expect more out of themselves because they’re not just seven-year-olds or six-year-olds. They’re adults creating something for other people. Their responsibility is greater, I mean, they’re doing something for other people. This is their job and they’re really good at it.”

Mark’s changing identity became a touchstone for Janie’s developing understanding of the power of dramatic inquiry. At the beginning of the
year, Mark often impulsively blurted out imaginative ideas, which were marginalized by peers and regarded by Janie as often “inappropriate.” Yet, in the context of the activities and practices of the travel agency, Mark’s improvised ideas could become central. Midway through the year his invention of a cage to protect humans from jaguars became a turning point when this idea inspired other students, who engaged in dramatic improvisation about using, and actually constructing, protective devices to take on safari. As Janie noted, “It was not just the children who began to see Mark differently. I did, too. He had become a member of our community.” By the end of the year Mark socially participated in multiple ways. In the Rwandan example he contributed but never blurted out ideas, joined in with a group making a drum, later moved his body rhythmically when possible music was shared by others, and listened when a story was told. Janie stressed how he had changed: “He wasn’t that kid at the beginning of the year when everyone was doing this and rolling their eyes. He wasn’t that person anymore. He was that person, ‘Wooh, what’s he going to say?’ And then they were able to talk to him about it and he was able to change his ideas, which he would have never done.”

In dramatic inquiry, an epistemic frame is not given but is created over time through ongoing interactions and social practices. New identities only form when students have the agency to engage in new practices over days and months. In all SAIL classrooms the children eagerly chose to take on responsibility for collaboratively grappling with social problems. They regularly brought in artifacts and information from home, and many parents reported on how reading, research, and play continued out of school with friends. In Trish Russell’s classroom, the children wrote letters at the end of the year to their prospective second-grade teachers filled with extended narratives, retellings, references to social interactions, and their pleasure at pretending and imagining the world differently. All but one letter focused mostly on their dramatic inquiries and pointed to identities that contrasted with the dominant individualistic school discourse. These comments (with corrected spellings) were typical:

Peter: It is fun to pretend to go to different places all around the world. I went to the rain forest and the ocean. I got to study dolphins. I got to pretend to be a dolphin. I liked when we made an ocean out of paper.

Julie: I liked it when my friends Lilly and Susan helped me understand a hard problem.

Tina: I like pretending to be a nurse. . . . We are being people in the hospital because someone [Bruce Foster] got bit by a shark. We
are trying to help him get better. We are also seeing if we have to shut down Scuba Adventures. I hope we don’t have to. I want to keep it safe.

Trish’s summarizing comments point to a comparison of students’ identification with community practices at the end of one year with the previous year: “Usually they write a few lines and say things like ‘I like recess. I like math.’ But never about anything that happened in the classroom and never with this sort of detail. Many of these letters are their longest pieces of writing ever. They’re filled with the language of what ‘we’ did. They just brought tears to my eyes. I felt like the children had been making memories to take with them.”

Though young people’s identities as community members change over time when they have repeated opportunities to collaborate as competent, knowledgeable participants in the spaces of whatever drama worlds are created, Sarah’s comments about fifth graders Nick and Xavier suggest that students using dramatic inquiry may begin to identify differently in a very short period of time.

Nick was usually a quiet student. In the dramatic inquiry he contributed, made comments, and engaged in conversations that were unusual for him in the classroom. Xavier often positioned himself as an outsider by distancing himself from his peers in the everyday classroom. Yet, in the imagined space he could share his thoughts in a space where he was heard. In his reflection he wrote, “In drama class I felt cool and a part of the group. It helped me learn better.”

**DRAMATIC INQUIRY IS A LITERACY OF POWER RELATIONSHIPS**

When adults foster a critical awareness of how power operates in social relationships, a literacy of possibilities may become a literacy of power relationships. Critical inquiry questions can be contextualized in engaging imagined-and-real spaces of dramatic inquiry, focused on power relationship, and explored by students in improvised activities that are both playful and performative. Adult participation can focus inquiry, shape activities, and dialogically extend understanding.

In Sarah Higgins’s classroom, critical inquiry questions were contextualized in the imagined task she negotiated with her students: a group of sculptors were charged with designing a sculpture to commemorate Thanksgiving.
The dramatic performances by her and visiting adults presented alternative perspectives to the stereotypical ones assumed by the students' textbook and revealed in their initial drawings. The students encountered some of the silenced voices in the Thanksgiving story, for example, that the indigenous people kept the Pilgrims alive but were then attacked by the English, who broke the 1621 peace treaty. However, it was only when the inquiry question was dramatically tightened to focus on choosing between designing a statue that celebrated or mourned Thanksgiving that the students-as-Wampanoags revisited their designs and began to comment on their perception of their power to shape different interpretations. The following exchange between Xavier and John illustrates different assumptions of the young people:

Xavier: People think we got along and they want to put up a statue of us getting along, we did NOT get along.

John: You really can’t change what happened in the past. The past is the past. [He added later:] We’re here and we’re alive and that’s all in the past and we’re doing fine so we should just let it go.

Xavier: But you can change it now. You can change the past now so in the future. . . . [He added later:] I would show a sculpture of a peace treaty but behind the sculpture a war scene.

John regarded the past as unchangeable events that should be let go, whereas Xavier assumed that he had some power to shape people's future interpretations about the meaning of the past. He was adamant that images of war had to accompany images based on the traditional discourse that Thanksgiving was an idyllic peace.

In Trish Russell’s first-grade classroom, she and Brian had more time to use the tools of dramatic inquiry to make visible and explore with students how power circulates and can be supported or contested in relation to other people (Foucault, 1980): the power of a Safety Commission to shut down a travel company and the power of people in a hospital to save a person’s life. In the spaces of dramatic inquiry, the children took on responsibility for using power within those relationships as they improvised responses to critical inquiry questions: Should Scuba Adventures be closed? How will the patient be cared for?

In dramatic improvisation the young people had imagined and critiqued the shark attack experience from the viewpoints of a victim, the sharks, and the journalists retelling the story. Additionally, many of the children eagerly set up and, as if they were physicians and nurses, played with running the hospital where Bruce Foster, who had been bitten by a shark, was in
intensive care. As they created and labeled representations of medical equipment, tended sick patients, and kept records, they experienced the incident from the viewpoints of professional caregivers, many of whom on several occasions (in informal dramatic performances) reported to Trish-as-Bruce’s mother his fluctuating condition and all they were doing to save him despite the many medical challenges they invented.

On a subsequent day, after many of the young people read from their prominently displayed shark attack stories, Trish, Brian, Mary Beth Ressler (another graduate student participant-observer), and a visiting mother of one of the children gave a more formal dramatic performance of a prepared, but also improvised and interactive, scenario that represented what had happened after Bruce Foster had been attacked; it was designed to contextualize their inquiries in a dramatization of multiple laminated spaces of power relationships. Brian began by standing beside and reading an adult-written sign for “Scuba Adventures: We take you where no one else will go” attached to the end of a bookcase. He had a “Closed temporarily” sign written in red ink in his hand. As Brian narrated what happened to the shark attack victim and how the company had been closed down, he firmly attached the sign. Standing nearby, a shocked-looking Mary Beth was introduced reading the adult-created front page of the Florida Times newspaper with the clearly visible headline “Shark Attack.” Brian read the headline with the children and then mediated a brief interview with Mary Beth-as-the-reader who told how the company took people to “swim with sharks.” Mary Beth-as-a-newspaper reporter then interviewed a distraught Trish-as-Bruce-Foster’s-mother, who was in the waiting room at the hospital looking at adult-created charts that showed fluctuating vital signs. Trish fielded questions from the children, who wanted to know how her son was being cared for. Finally, a very serious-looking Carol-as-Florida-Safety-Commissioner was introduced. She asked the children what should be done about Scuba Adventures. The children wanted to know who she was, and in a discussion about what a safety commissioner might do they agreed that some people had to have the power to stop others from being unsafe. Several children said Scuba Adventures should be closed down. Pointing to the red sign, Brian asked whether it should be closed “temporarily” or “forever.” After explaining the word temporarily, their monologic opinion was clear: No one thought it should be reopened. A dictated red sign was added: “Closed forever.”

Three weeks later, though Trish had reported that the children were finished with the Bruce Foster narrative, when Brian arrived David approached him, saying, “Bruce Foster is still in intensive care.” When a space was created for David to speak and address the whole class, it was clear that the children were keen to return to the story. Within moments
the hospital had been reestablished, with David-as-Dr-Bloodsector checking on the patient’s vital signs and Joan drawing a new chart showing that his blood pressure was now normal.

Ten minutes later, having gathered the children together, Brian-as-the-safety-commissioner asked the children if they would like to imagine that they also worked on the commission and could make the final decision about what should happen to Scuba Adventures. They were keen to do that, but unsure what to do. When Brian-as-the-safety-commissioner said that maybe all water adventure vacation companies should be shut down as just too dangerous, it was a serious Ansel who said that this would have to include Exciting Water Adventures (the enterprise they had previously imagined running), and everyone heard that in a moment of stillness that signaled assent.

To introduce another viewpoint, Brian moved back to the “CLOSED FOREVER” sign. Brian-as-Scuba-Adventures-owner said how sorry he was about Bruce Foster, promised to do whatever he could to make amends, but begged them not to shut him down because he had no money left in the bank. Moving toward the children, Brian intended to position them with a skeptical view on the owner’s appeal, but power had flowed to the owner and the dominant voice (that Ansel endorsed) was that he should be given another chance.

In a brief 5-minute meeting, as if they were safety commissioners, only a few of the children still monologically wanted to shut down Scuba Adventures. They had a more complex awareness of the power relationships. After several views had been heard, and Trish-as-Bruce-Foster’s-mother was asked what she thought (she wanted no one to get hurt again), one person suggested that there should be safety rules, and no one was opposed to drafting official commission rules. Though there was no time on that day to enact what would happen, many wanted to write a concluding story. Everyone agreed that Scuba Adventures could reopen, but only when the owner showed that he would follow rules that would keep everyone safe, with no exceptions.

PERFORMING POSSIBLE SELVES AND CHANGING IDENTITIES

In the performances of everyday classroom spaces there is an everyday power relationship between presenters and audience that affects the authority of people to control events and their interpretation. Adults (who tend to position themselves as presenters in authority) and young people (who tend to be positioned as an audience with little authority) can settle into predictable relationships and patterns of interaction in which over time the subjectivities, or social positions, of “teacher” and “students” are constructed; from a relational viewpoint, these become people’s primary or fallback classroom identities.
However, the identities of teachers and students can change. After a year of using dramatic inquiry, Janie saw herself in a very different relationship with the young people in her classroom.

You actually see their excitement in learning and that's what teachers want to do. Teachers want to see kids who want to learn. Teachers want to see kids learning. That's what dramatic inquiry did. Not only academically. It's fun to see kids talking together and working in a group. And getting something done that's cool for everybody. I think, for me, it really was looking at children differently. Honestly. Truly different. This way, there's no supposed to, have to, you're wrong, there's no wrong way because they're different and they're being them. You don't have expectations of them to be a certain person. They can be whoever they want to be.

Drama literacy tools enable teachers to "look differently" at young people who are silenced or marginalized in the conventional standardized school curriculum. In Trish Russell's classroom Jean would talk over others while David, who had cerebral palsy, tended not to speak in public. Some may experience a deeply alienated position: Ansel, at the beginning of the year, had a highly oppositional relational identity. He was regularly in the principal's office for aggressive behavior toward others, had difficulty collaborating with peers, and said he had no friends and hated school.

In dramatic performances, social positions shift when children and adults take on different possible selves. Over time, everyday positional identities can also be transformed: young people can become more than their prior largely predictable identity as "students" and adults more than "teachers." In the imagined and real spaces of dramatic performances, adults can radically affect how young people position their selves and one another in the classroom community. Students with previous low status and little power can be positioned with higher authority to act and interpret events in spaces with a common frame of shared responsibility. Over the year, as well as pretending to be other people or creatures (includes sharks and bats), with support Ansel took on collaborative authority within the group as various possible selves (as a bus driver, a gatherer of other people's opinions, a creator of images, a sharer of information from books, and a person fielding questions). His drawing abilities, his imagination, and his content knowledge all came to the fore as much as possible, interpreted as "for us" within spaces where he could choose how to participate in activities. Over the same time,
Joan became someone who waited more often before talking, and David became someone who would speak, when it became clear to both of them that everyone’s ideas would be heard and used and that no one could dominate in the collaborative spaces in which they were included. And Trish’s desire to share more power with children was also realized as she took on multiple supportive possible selves in the drama worlds (e.g., as a reporter, a mother, and a hospital administrator) and came to position children differently. She summarized her changing identity: “Not only do you teach them how to be creative and how to incorporate language arts but also how to be real people and to feel like they’re going to be somebody in the world.”

**DRAMATIC INQUIRY AS COLLABORATIVE SOCIAL IMAGINATION**

Maxine Greene (1996) insists that use of social imagination, collaboratively grounded in the lives of adults and young people, is central to learning and critical inquiry.

The classroom situation most provocative of thoughtfulness and critical consciousness is the one in which teachers and learners find themselves conducting a sort of collaborative search, each from her or his lived situation.... Imagining things being otherwise may be a first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed.... an imaginative ability is required if the becoming different that learning involves is actually to take place. (pp. 22–23)

The expansive literacy tools of dramatic inquiry, which are available to whoever can imagine their use, can be used to harness the dramatic imagination in order to create classroom spaces where collaborative, dialogic, and critical explorations of diverse cultural worlds become a norm. Classrooms can become communities where people value agency grounded by playful collaborative risk and evolving identities shaped in the dialogic understanding made possible through embracing, performing, and exploring our differences as well as our connections.

We are not naïve about the oppressive demands, felt and feared by teachers, that press to standardize curriculum and box classrooms into spaces closed to the spontaneity, playfulness, and imagination of young people and adults. The teachers we write about in this book have inspired us. We know that even in schools where their work has been under- or unappreciated, spaces may still be created that are open to worlds within and beyond the school walls, and where the vitality and diversity of students with all their challenges and wonder can be celebrated.