

Not just a walk in the park: The school production experience of upper primary students in a New Zealand school

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Abstract

This study reports on a case study, which investigated the experiences of teachers and students involved in the development of a school production in a New Zealand primary school. The production process utilized inquiry-based learning and integrated learning approaches to produce an original performance based on the school's history. Rather than outline the creative process itself, the study looked at the social and personal experience of the participants. The experiences of students are reported elsewhere. This article reports on the responses of students via a questionnaire and two focus groups administered after the production was performed for parents and community. Of particular interest were what students deemed to be helpful / unhelpful in the process of scene development and what they found memorable in the experience. Findings indicated that while students found the process of scene development demanding, they found a number of factors helpful, including the process of inquiry itself and the use of improvisation. Most students found the production process enjoyable for a range of reasons, including a sense of achievement for a particular role performed, memorable moments, audience connection and the opportunity to work with others on a major enterprise. The study also found a correlation between the level of enjoyment expressed by students, and the amount of ownership they felt they had over the content of the scenes.

Introduction

The focus of this article is the primary school production, a ubiquitous phenomenon in many countries but one which appears to be singularly unresearched. The particular school production reported on here was undertaken by Woody Valley Primary School, which is nestled at the base of the Waitakere Mountains to the west of Auckland, New Zealand^[1]. The show was called *Mokoroa: Guardian of the Valley*. Like many primary schools, this one had regularly engaged its senior classes in the regular production of school shows, usually involving the purchase of rights to a script and music of a show written for children, with children being cast in roles (some star) and staff taking on roles of director, musical director, stage manager, choreographer, and so on.

Woody Valley Primary School is a relatively multicultural school with a strong Maori parent presence. What made *Mokoroa: Guardian of the Valley* distinctive was that it was devised by teachers and senior students collaboratively as an outcome of an inquiry process that integrated a range of curriculum strands. It drew on the history and heritages of the local area and included a strong emphasis on both local tangata whenua^[2] (Te Kawerau a Maki) and on Maori mythology in general. It also paid homage to other cultural groups associated with the

area, especially settlers from the Dalmatian coast. In many instances, community representatives of cultural groups were consulted as part of the inquiry process.

Research context and design

Case studies allow for an in depth investigation into specific instances with a view to developing or illustrating general instances. This project was a case study investigating five teachers' experiences of a process that entailed considerable risk for them. Five teachers were involved as research subjects. Four were "generalist", classroom teachers from the Year 5/6 syndicate: Lynette, the syndicate leader, Rachel, Pauline and Ingrid (all pseudonyms). These four classes were each charged with devising two scenes for the production, based on two local history/heritage topics that were the object of their class inquiry. The fifth teacher, Wanda (pseudonym) was the school's music specialist and was responsible for developing an original composition with students as the production's overture and for devising a series of interludes, which would serve to link the classes' scenes. The students were also involved as research subjects and a major aim of the project was to investigate what the production experience was like from their point of view.

The production phases of the production process were as follows:

1. A concept, scenario and timeframe was developed and adopted (teacher focus).
2. An allocation of responsibilities was decided upon (teacher, wider staff and community focus).
3. A class-based process of inquiry was instituted, aimed at fleshing out the production scenario and identifying potentially "dramatic" material (teacher and student focus).
4. Eight-minute scenes and complementary interludes were developed, rehearsed, resourced and staged (teacher, student, wider staff and community focus).
5. The production process was reflected on systematically by all stake-holders.

The original invitation to us to undertake this project was made by the music specialist (Wanda), who had a major coordinating role in the production and worked closely with staff, and was endorsed by the four Year 5/6 syndicate teachers who were keen to have the process investigated so as to maximize its potential for professional learning.

As part of the formal ethical approval process, letters of invitation explaining the aims of the project, their role in the research and their rights, were given to all prospective participants, staff and students (and their parents), and their consent obtained. The principal was consulted from the start (and actually interviewed). Because the first researcher was husband to Wanda, any interviewing of her was done by the second researcher (Aitken).

The research project aimed to ascertain the hopes, expectations and anxieties these teachers had prior to their embarking on an innovative school production enterprise as well as their reflections on the process they engaged it to bring this enterprise to fruition. It also aimed to investigate how some of their students responded to the challenges that were put to them as both learners and performers. As Yin (1989) points out, case study research can be (a) exploratory (description and analysis leading to the development of hypotheses), (b) descriptive (providing narrative accounts and rich vignettes of practice) and (c) explanatory (offering causal explanations of the impact of various interventions. This case study was primarily exploratory, with scope for the explanatory. The decision of the research team to

analyse students and teacher data separately was to allow for a rich set of comparative findings.

The research questions were:

1. How does a small sample of primary teachers of Year 5/6 classes^[3] view curriculum integration?
2. How does a small sample of primary teachers of Year 5/6 classes view inquiry-based learning?
3. What hopes and anxieties do a small sample of primary teachers of Year 5/6 classes have at the prospect of developing a scene on a given topic for an integrated school production?
4. What do a small sample of primary teachers of Year 5/6 classes identify as helpful in relation to their developing and producing a scene on a given topic for an integrated school production with their Year 5/6 students.
5. What do a sample of Year 5/6 primary students identify as helping them to develop a scene on a given topic for an integrated school production? What was unhelpful?
6. What do a sample of Year 5/6 primary students identify as enjoyable or memorable about their involvement in an integrated school production? What was not enjoyable or memorable?

This was primarily qualitative research with a phenomenological emphasis, that is, it aimed to shed light on how major participants in a process experienced it. However, there was scope for some data to be analysed quantitatively. Teachers were asked to complete an initial questionnaire, to complete a questionnaire at the completion of the production and be interviewed at the completion of the production. The school principal was also interviewed. These interviews were semi-structured. Student participants also completed a questionnaire after the production (Appendix 1) and a random selection of volunteers took part in two focus groups (Appendix 2). The latter were also semi-structured and used a number of sequenced prompts.

In this article, we focus on the children and their response to a production experience which was unique for them (Questions 5 and 6 above). Our initial intention was to focus on both students and teachers within a single article, but our desire to give “voice” to our young participants encouraged us to highlight their story alone. As indicated, most data was qualitative. “Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). After transcription, the open questionnaire and focus interview data were initially separated question by question and then analysed for emergent themes and patterns within themes, question by question. These themes were then compared *across* questions to allow for potential modification from additional data. Likert-scale quantitative data were analysed in a simple numerical way. Where possible, in the findings section of this article, prevalence will be indicated.

Literature review

There appears to be very little research on the school production, despite its being a commonplace occurrence in schools around the world. In the New Zealand context, Moreland and Cowie (2007) have investigated the successful teaching of mask-making as contributing to successful participation in a school production, but this study was in the context of a

particular learning area (Technology). Beyond that, the literature tends to consist of accounts of production experiences (Hayes, 1999; Swann, 2003; Aiello, 2008) and how-to's (Gavelis, Erez, Galbraith, Haddrick, Robert, Rossini, Saltar & Zeigler, 2007). The one research study we located was an American case study investigating day-by-day processes in a high school drama production, covering a large range of production aspects (Gershman, 1990).

The literature on integrated learning as an umbrella approach to teaching and learning is more substantial. As in other educational settings, the most recent New Zealand national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) provides opportunities for integrated learning. However, the *how* of integration is still a matter of debate and its efficacy relatively unresearched. In educational contexts, curriculum integration is often talked about in terms of thematic orientations and the need to contest traditional disciplinary boundaries. For example, James Beane (1995) notes that, “curriculum integration begins with the identification of organizing themes or centers for learning experiences” and “transcends subject-area and disciplinary identifications” (p. 619). However, there are other approaches that go beyond matters of programming and organization, and are based in the integrative workings of the aesthetic as a mode of cognition. This approach is termed “substantive curriculum integration” by Marshall (2005), who describes it in the following terms:

Substantive integration...involves making conceptual connections that underlie art and other disciplines. It reveals something of the core principles, structures, and practices of fields by moving beyond the most concrete level (depicting subject matters particular to disciplines), to a more abstract level (tapping into the concepts that underlie the disciplines addressed) to the most profound and conceptual level (revealing concepts that are common to art, the disciplines with which it is integrated, and the mind in general) (pp. 228-229).

At the start of the project we imagined that the major driver of integration for teachers and students would be the need to solve specific problems related to the provision of content for each class's allocated segment. In this article, we provide a sense of what integrated learning meant from the perspective of students themselves.

The production experience

The overall shape of production, *Mokoroa: Guardian of the Valley*, as finally presented can be found in Appendix 3. The Prologue and Epilogue were primarily music and dance performances. All students in the senior school (108) were involved in at least one scene or were involved in the interludes as Turehu (mythical Maori forest fairies). Each scene and interlude was introduced by a brief narrative read by a student and pre-recorded.

Students' views on the production

Post-production questionnaire

The post-production questionnaire (Appendix 1) was completed by 108 students across all four classes. Half the students indicated they had one role in the production, either as actor (pit-saw worker, settler, sailor, etc), musician or Turehu. Some of these also indicated a staging role (e.g. props). A rather staggering 48% of students performed two acting roles and sometimes three. A tiny group of students (n = 3) indicated that their only role was to help with staging.

As indicated previously, each class had the same brief, that is, to develop two scenes for the production related to an event or era in the Valley's history. The second question asked students to list activities they did that *helped* them develop their ideas for their class's scene? Table 1 lists the categories of activity that emerged from the questionnaires and the number of occurrences mentioned for each class (some students indicated more than one activity). The choice of activities offers a snapshot of how each class saw its involvement in the development of their scene.

- Lynette's class clearly saw brainstorming/contributing ideas as their major contribution (53% of activities) to their scene. We get a hint of the process followed, with one student remarking that their teacher "put them [ideas] together to make a scene". There were also significant contributions by way of costumes and prompts. No student mentioned writing as a contribution. Only a small number failed to indicate a contribution (14%).
- In contrast, 8 of Pauline's student mentioned scripting/writing as their contribution (28%). One student wrote: "I (and two others) wrote the script for the *Orpheus* scene," while another mentioned their teacher's editing role. However, few mentioned such activities as contributing ideas or researching. The making of props was numerically the most common contribution (38%) with a significant number failing to indicate any contribution at all (31%). We get a suggestion here of a small group committed to scripting (working with the teacher) and others busy at work making props.
- In Rachel's class, the activity of inquiry was by far the biggest numerically (32%), with other activities receiving few (costumes) or just one mention. Almost half of these students failed to mention a contribution (48%). One has a sense here of some significant student inquiry contributing to scenes which appear to have been very much determined by the teacher.
- Ingrid's class had the highest percentage of students indicating scripting as their contribution (30%), with occasional mentions of other activities. Those involved in the writing were clearly enthusiastic about this activity: "I also did a lot of script writing! It was fun." This class has some similarities to Pauline's, but a much bigger percentage (60%) seem to suggest a nil contribution or recollection in terms of their classroom activities.

Activity	Lynette (n=28)	Pauline (n=29)	Rachel (n=31)	Ingrid (n=20)
Researcher/inquirer		1	10	1
Brainstorming (developing ideas)	12			2
Contributing ideas	3	2		
Suggesting movement			1	
Applying ideas, trying out, role play	1			1

Scripting/writing		8	1	6
Making a floor plan	1			
Contributing costumes	5		3	
Contributing props	4	11	1	
No activities mentioned	4	9	15	12

Table 1: Activities contributing to class scene

In response to Question 2, a significant number of students (40%) mentioned having engaged in no activities contributing to their class scene. However, for Question 3, asking them about what they learnt to do by being involved in the production (see Table 2), only 4 students provided no answer. 41% of all students, spread across the four classes, mentioned learning acting skills including voice projection. In their wordings, we begin to get a flavour of what “acting” meant in each teacher’s class. In Lynette’s class, one student noted that “You have to pretend you are the person who you have to act,” while another noted that “it felt like I was in a movie”. In Pauline’s class, one student wrote: “I learnt how to stay still and bend my back really low and not lose my balance.” In Rachel’s class, we can hear a teacher’s voice^[4] coming through when one student writes: “To project your voice right to the back of the room, and also yell from your tummy NOT your throat.” In Ingrid’s class a student wrote: “To get more hooked into my character and to project my voice.” Some of the learnings mentioned reflected the specific nature of the scene performed. Lynette’s class, for example, had performed a Dalmatian dance as part of their scene. Students across all four classes (12%) mentioned overcoming fear (e.g. “I learned not be embarrassed by myself, have confidence in me”). A number of students, especially from Lynette’s and Rachel’s classes, mentioned specific facilitative behaviours learnt (another glimpse into the teachers’ approaches). One of Lynette’s students wrote: “Not interrupt”. One of Rachel’s students wrote: “I learnt that you should be organized!” Finally, it is noteworthy that 33% of students, despite the wording of the question, commented on historical content knowledge gained rather than skills learned. In our view, this albeit “incorrect” response to the question could be taken as an indication of the impact on these young people of the cultural and historical knowledge gained from the process of inquiry, which furnished them with the material for their scenes.

Learnings	Lynette (n=28)	Pauline (n=29)	Rachel (n=31)	Ingrid (n=20)
Acting skills (including vocal skills)	9	13	14	8
Movement skills (including generic dance/juggling skills)	2	1		
Traditional dance and movement	6	1		

Stage work	1	1		
Theatre/stage knowledge		1	2	1
Facilitative attitudes and behaviours	6	1	5	2
Overcoming fear/self-consciousness	3	4	3	3
How to compose or play music		1	1	4
Inquiry skills and knowledge of local history	6	17	4	6
No learnings mentioned			3	1

Table 2: What students learnt to do through production involvement

In response to Question 4, all students found something they enjoyed about their involvement in the production (Table 3). What is clear here is the range of aspects that students found to enjoy. The most common aspect (25%) was the experience of acting itself. A related aspect (15%) was a particular moment or scene. One student wrote: “Telling the morepork to be quiet.” Another: “Doing Mokoroa because I loved the way Mokoroa was.” A number of students mentioned the curtain call as a special moment. One wrote: “I enjoyed it when we all held hands and bowed at the end. Significant numbers identified rehearsing (12%) and working with others (9%) as the most enjoyable aspect of the production.

Enjoyable aspects	Lynette (n=28)	Pauline (n=29)	Rachel (n=31)	Ingrid (n=20)
Rehearsing	4	2	4	2
Learning a particular skill	6		1	
Script-writing				2
Making/composing music		2	3	4
Working with others	2	1	6	1
The acting experience/being on stage	8	7	5	7
A particular scene or moment	4	9	3	
Wearing make-	1	4	1	3

up/costuming				
Audience relationship/rapport	2		1	
Playing a support role (stage-hand/ makings props)			4	2
Making an effort and having success	2			
The change in classroom routine/less work		4	1	
Learning more about the Valley			1	

Table 3: What was most enjoyable about production involvement

Responses to Question 5 (Table 4) indicate the production challenges these students identified. The most common choice related to some aspect of the role (27%), and included learning a particular dance, voice projection, some aspect of timing or concentration, and so on. One student wrote: “About staying still when I was dead and not tripping over.” Another wrote: “Acting like pulling [a] bulldozer.” A significant number of students identified overcoming performance anxiety (20%). One wrote: “Being on stage because I have stage fright.” Another frequently mentioned challenge (16%) related to the pressure of completing a task under time pressure in exacting circumstances. As an example, one student wrote: “The most challenging thing was that we had to put the desk and big chair in like 30 seconds.” A further 12% of students identified learning lines as their biggest challenge. Two students mentioned relationship challenges (“Being with the person I hate”), while one student mentioned “putting up with stressed teachers”. (As we shall see, the theme of teacher stress was significant in the focus group findings.) A small group (7%) chose not to indicate something they found challenging.

Challenges	Lynette (n=28)	Pauline (n=29)	Rachel (n=31)	Ingrid (n=20)
Mastering some aspect of a role (including voice projection)	2	12	9	2
Overcoming shyness/”stage fright”	8	7	6	5
Production pressure (scene changes, need for	4	6	6	1

speed)				
“Learning my lines”	5	3	1	4
The amount of practice	4		1	2
Aspects of music-making			5	2
Relationship challenges	1		1	
None mentioned	3	1	1	3

Table 4: What was most challenging about production involvement

Question 7[5] asked students what advice they would give to someone who was going to be involved in a similar production. From our reading, five categories emerged from the data, though we concede that there is some overlap here. The biggest category was recommending an attitude (29%). Students from all classes engaged in this, with Ingrid’s class providing the biggest proportion. One of her students said: “I am going to say it is hard to act and speak loud, but when you do it you will be proud of yourself.” One of Lynette’s students said simply: “Practice makes perfect.” One of Rachel students said: “School productions are really fun, but it takes a lot of time and effort. You don’t get things on your first try, but keep trying.” The next biggest category was specific advice about acting (24%). Nearly half of Rachel students (42%) were in this category. One said, “To project your voice and be that character.” (A number mentioned that word “project”.) One of Pauline’s students offered this: “If you make a mistake, don’t make a big deal about it, it will only make it more noticeable.” We’ve called the next-biggest category (17%) *exhortations* – on reflection an unsurprising response to the way the question was worded. We think of the exhortation as something you might say to an actor who is about to go on stage to lift their spirits and help focus them on the job in hand. Lynette’s students were most prominent in this category and, again, we’re getting a sense of the teacher’s voice in what these students are saying. One said: “Give it all you have and have fun,” while another said, “Have a good time and break a leg.” A fourth category involving students from across all four classes focused on reassurance and the importance of enjoyment. One of Pauline’s students said, “To learn your lines quickly, to have early nights and to not be scared.” (A number of her students mentioned early nights.) Another said: “If they were scared, tell them to ‘not look at the audience’.” The last category offered practical hints not related to acting, such as “Don’t stare at the lights”, “Get mics that are all working”, or the amusingly sage, “The teachers are likely to go to crazy town!”

Types of advice	Lynette (n=28)	Pauline (n=29)	Rachel (n=31)	Ingrid (n=20)
Recommending an attitude	7	9	5	10
Practical advice (acting)	2	6	13	5
Practical advice (non-acting)	1	5	3	1

Exhortations	11	1	5	1
Reassurance	3	5	4	2
None given or unrelated.	4	2		2

Table 5: Types of advice to a student engaged in a similar enterprise.

As Appendix 3 indicates, students were invited to rate their response to five prompts on a 0-5 Likert scale. These prompts were: “I enjoyed being in this production”; “I would like to do it again”; “I learned new things about performing”; “I learned new stories about our valley” and “I used my own ideas in the performance”. For the purposes of analysis, the prompts can be clumped into “enjoyment” (prompts 1 and 2) and “learning” (prompts 3 and 4) sets, and the individually analyzed “independence/initiative” (prompt 5) item.

An analysis of “positive” category ratings 3, 4 or 5 for the “enjoyment” set indicated that students overwhelmingly enjoyed being in the production and would like to do it again. An analysis of “positive” category ratings for the “learning” sets indicated students felt they learned new things about performing and learned new stories about their valley. Each class indicated a >87% rating in respect to their “enjoyment” set prompts and a >93% positive rating in respect to the “learning” set prompts.

From our perspective, the telling aspect of the data was the variation between classes in respect of the individual fifth prompt, that is, “I used my own ideas in the performance”. If we cluster scores of 0, 1 and 2 as less than positive responses, it emerges that Lynette’s class had the smallest percentage of students (21.4%) who indicated that their ideas were little used in the performance, followed by students in Ingrid’s (30%), then Pauline’s (38%) and finally Rachel’s (45%) class. It may not be a coincidence that Rachel’s class provided the lowest positive rating (87.1%) for the item, “I would like to do it again”.

In summary, these questionnaire findings suggest a high degree of involvement from these students in a production that a large majority (>87%) found an enjoyable experience. All students identified one or more aspects of the production they found enjoyable, most commonly the acting experience itself or some particular moment in their scene, with other aspects including the rehearsal experience and working with others. A number of challenges were identified. In descending order of frequency the most common of these related to a specific aspect of role, dealing with performance anxiety, the pressure to manage and complete tasks and learning lines. Virtually all students were happy to share advice they might offer a student engaged in a similar enterprise; in descending order of frequency these were recommending an attitude, advice about acting, exhortations, a focus on reassurance and enjoyment, and practical acting hints. Virtually all students identified learnings as a result of the production experience, beginning with acting skills (41%) as the most common, then overcoming fear and developing facilitative behaviours. At times in the questionnaires, students ignored the specific requirements of questions and emphasised how much they had learnt about the history of their own valley as a result of the process of inquiry that had been undertaken as part of the process of scene development. In respect of the latter, student responses varied enormously from teacher to teacher on the nature of their contribution and the extent of it. The percentage of students who indicated that they had contributed nothing to

the development of their class's scene ranged from 60% (Ingrid) to 14% (Lynette). From class to class, the way students expressed their contribution also varied. For Lynette's students the major contribution was through brainstorming/contributing ideas, for Pauline's it was making props (though with a significant percentage involved in scripting), for Rachel's it was inquiry and for Ingrid's it was scripting. Unsurprisingly, the Likert scale findings also showed a strong teacher factor in the variability across classes in relation to the extent to which students felt their ideas were taken up in the performance.

Student post-production focus groups

Two focus groups of six students each, with 3 students drawn from each of the 4 classes, were conducted in the week after the production closed (see Appendix 2). Of the 12, three were boys and five were Maori or Pasifika students. The sample of students was somewhat purposive, with classroom teachers selecting students they deemed to have played significant roles in their classes' efforts. As became clear, a number of these students played multiple roles with high demands on them, and this was not something they necessarily welcomed by the students themselves. In identifying and analyzing themes and trends, we have coded *across* both transcripts.

In response to a general question on how they felt about the production process overall, most students were positive, finding it "fun" (3), "cool" (2), "interesting" (3) or "enjoyable" (1). For two students the enjoyment came from working with some community members who gave them time to work with the students on their vignettes or interludes (Turehu). However, a significant number of students found the rehearsal demands intense, especially when they had more than one role, with one student describing himself as "exhausted", another noting that "it wasn't just a walk in the park" and two remarking on how long it took to perfect a small segment of script. Four students experienced a dilemma of conflicting demands, mentioning that involvement in the production meant that they missed out on other activities such as music and library. Two students mentioned nervousness. Madeleine said: "At first I was scared and didn't want to do it, and I only wanted to be a musician, but then it wasn't that bad."

The second question asked students about the process of scene development – what they had learned about making up a scene and putting it on? While there were a number of comments on performance, with students mentioning the process of learning lines (2) and the importance of voice projection (2), we will focus here on how the students represented the process of scene development. All of the students who mentioned scripting found it demanding. Mario found that "making the script and all the things for just one scene takes more than I expected", Angela noted that at times it was "quite exhausting", Wiremu found it "harder than expected", Mary found it "hard" and "frustrating", Nisha found it "quite hard....even if they had a story", while Lynette found it "rather difficult". Why was this?

We had to partner up with someone...and it was quite exhausting to start writing scripts 'cause once you've come up with something you've written it all down and you go show the teacher and the teacher says, "Oh no, that's only the first part so now write another part" and then it'll take about three more days to write the next part of the script, and pooling everything together.... (Angela)

We tried to put a couple of things in that we thought would be fun and stuff for the audience and then in the first show we realised that it didn't really go that well so we had to change the script and then the second time we'd made it a bit more fun but there was still some parts we needed to fix up. (Wiremu)

At first it was quite hard to put our scenes together because...the kids and the teachers both had a perspective on what the scenes should be like and what we wanted to happen and people with lines and stuff would get confused and muddle up their lines and then we'd have to keep going over and over and over again, practising until everyone got it right. But I guess it was fair so that everyone knew what they were doing. (Mary)

In different ways, Wiremu and Angela (who were co-writers) and Mary are articulating the challenges of process. They are commenting on the fact that scenes don't come together magically, and that trial and error and revision are a part of the process. So is the need to satisfy a number of stakeholders: your classroom teacher, your fellow students and, above all, your audience. Not all students expressed this aspect of process as a chore. Pearce commented on the improvisatory nature of the process whereby the class's Mokoroa scene was developed, describing it as "cool and fun" and "pretty easy".

Another kind of difficulty was represented by Christina, who found one of her scenes challenging because "it was based on a true thing so it was quite hard to get all the facts right but also make it interesting." We've mentioned in a number of places the level of interest in their own valley that some students developed. Christina's struggle was related to her desire for authenticity, and this desire became her benchmark for writing. What she learnt from this struggle was the need "to make sure you know a lot about what you're writing about so that you don't make stuff up and just put it in there."

Focus group students mentioned a number of ways teachers had been helpful. As we have seen, learning lines was a big issue with many students. Three students mentioned their teachers matching them with others to help with the process of learning lines. Two students from the same class found it helpful to perform their scene in front of the class as a way of settling nerves. Others mentioned teachers acting as prompts and generally offering encouragement and advice.

One particular form of advice relates to the question of "ad libbing" which became a pronounced theme in the focus group from Rachel and Pauline's class. However, we find an expression of it from Angela, in the other group:

Like, if I made a mistake, like when I was on stage and let's say I coughed, I could, like, just go, "oh, I think I have a bit of a cold," or something like that. Like, I could fix up my mistake, not...sit there frozen and look all confused and scared....

We've seen that, in general, scripting a scene has meant negotiating and writing things down, obtaining the teacher's approval and then the subsequent need to memorise with its concomitant *fear of forgetting*. We have also seen that improvisation has been, at times, an aspect of the scene development process. Here, via the teacher's advice, it serves a twofold purpose: firstly, it continues the process of scene development; secondly, and more importantly, it offers a strategy for handling on-stage "crises such as forgetting lines and thus serves as reassurance. Virtually all students in the Rachel/Pauline focus group had stories to

tell about making up lines “on the spot”. Amanda referred to being encouraged by her teacher to “improvise a little...to make it more interesting”. Mary, referring to her role as a hippy activist, talked about adding lines to “make it seem more realistic”. Christina mentioned ad libbing as a way of “patch[ing] up without making it look like we made a mistake and that was quite difficult but we did it.” How? “By thinking very, very quickly.” She added: “It gave you a sense of relief that you hadn’t mucked up and...ruined your scene.” In response to another question, Wiremu described his enjoyment of improvisation in the follow way: “It was fun...being in charge of what you had to say.”

What would students have liked their teachers to have done differently? The major theme to emerge here, from both groups was teacher response to pressure and the negative impact this had on them as students. In interviews, children were remarkably open about this aspect of the experience. We wondered whether this willingness to critique their teachers was attributable to the fact that we were outside ‘neutral’ interviewers, or whether it reflected a school-wide culture of critical reflection and openness. Perhaps it was a combination of both. In any case, a number of teacher behaviours were identified. Caitlin described her teacher as continually stopping run-throughs and “telling us, ‘No, that’s not good enough, you’ve got to give it...more pizzazz.’” Mary described teachers reacting angrily to the noise the Turehu were making. Amanda described teachers as exhibiting stress through “nagging”, saying “we weren’t doing it right” and reducing the amount of advice given. Christina and Nisha used the word “grumpy” to describe teachers under pressure. All students indicated that these teacher behaviours made them feel nervous and make even more mistakes. Mary’s solution to this issue was for the Turehu to have apologised. Amanda’s solution was for teachers to give examples. “They give examples sometimes, but not always, so it would be easier if they just showed us what to do so we knew how to do it better.” There were a number of other suggestions for change: Wiremu would have liked more opportunity to “experiment” (“I probably would have thought about extending or abbreviating the scripts, evening out the lines so everybody had a fair amount of word...”); Candice disliked having other classes in the hall during rehearsal; Nisha and Pearce would have liked less rush in applying make-up; Christina would have liked more time and less rush in the script-writing process; and finally Nisha complained about her teaching tinkering with the script (“When we were doing our...script...Miss...should not have changed our script a lot because we really wanted to keep some of the funny parts.”).

Responses to what was memorable fell into three themes: audience connection; the special nature of the role; and enjoyment of a non-acting task. Our favourite quotation related to the first of these themes comes from Angela:

The most thing that you remembered was going up to do your part and when you go out there you sort of feel like that little feeling in your tummy like you don’t want to do it anymore and the most thing that your friends say to you are they keep saying, “Look at their forehead, look at their forehead,” and... “Don’t look into their eyes because it’ll creep you out.”

This response was atypical of the eight audience connection comments because it focuses on performance anxiety and how it might be addressed. (Angela attributed the advice to her friends and a teacher.) Most focused on the buzz of performing. Wiremu referred to the “adrenaline”, a number commented on their sense of audience enjoyment and seeing family members (“I remember all their faces laughing”). Two students mentioned the excitement of the final night. Three students mentioned their roles as memorable: Madeleine because of her

hippie reporter costume; Amanda because she was the lead figure in the elaborate Mokoroa puppet; and Mary^[6] because she was involved in one of the production's genuinely moving moments:

...when we were bringing Mokoroa back to life because in scene one Mokoroa dies and the Turehu bring him back to life and then I sort of say goodbye to him in Maori and then me, Emma and Christina get to call on his angel to bring him back to life.

In addition, three students mentioned non-acting involvements that were clearly memorable to them. For two, these involved the making of props and for a third, it involve the hectic nature of being a stagehand and ensuring that things were done on time and efficiently.

What did these students find hardest? The most frequent response (7 students) related to pressure, which fell into two categories. The first of these was the pressure to learn and remember lines and the impact of this pressure on confidence. As captain of the *Orpheus*, for example, Pearce had a large number of lines to learn. The second and most cited cause of pressure was related to the multiplicity of roles these highly involved students were prepared to take on. This not only involved them in early morning starts (Amanda) in the lead-up time, but also meant quick costume changes on the night. Nisha said: "The hardest thing for me was when I had to go from the orchestra pit to the stage and get into my costume and I only have one scene to change and get my makeup on and get my mic." Other difficulties with single mentions were being nagged (Angela), staying in role (Candice), and working closely with people you don't know (Mary). Among Mary's roles was being a Turehu, a group that was put together from across classes. She commented: "It was quite odd having to work really close with them and work really hard together...but in the end it turned out quite fine because we got to meet heaps of people."

All but one student responded eagerly when asked if they had learned anything about themselves. Amanda set a general tone when she told us that, "I definitely learnt that there's more to me than just Amanda...". Like other student who had had very limited acting experience, she was doing something for the first time and found that she could rise to the challenge. She said:

You sit backstage thinking you can't do it and then you go out there and your whole body just...you're like a whole different person because you're out there and you're doing things you wouldn't normally do. And that's what surprised me about myself because I never thought I would actually be able to be like that.

Mary had not seen herself as a dancer, but discovered, "That I could do it, because in the end...I did a really good job and I'd go backstage and Max [one of the adult volunteer helpers] would be like, 'Oh, yeah, you did it. You did such a great job.'" Pearce discovered he was "a pretty good actor". Christina found that she wasn't as shy as she thought she would be. Nisha and Christina didn't think they would be able to remember all their lines. Sofia and Candice learned that they could project their voices. Sofia learnt that she could stay in character and "get over myself. Like I had my exam yesterday and I got over myself". Sofia's comment is particularly compelling, since it implies that her new ability to self-manage stayed with her as something she could apply in a different context (and, indeed, that she was conscious of this transference). Caitlin, Candice and Mario found that they could occupy the shoes of a character unlike themselves (an old lady or a "professional guy"). And Wiremu

discovered than when “intimidated by the audience”, he should employ his “three-two-one thing”: “It’s just you don’t think about it, you just count down from three and then on one you do it and you don’t stop until you’ve finished.”

Within the focus group discussions, it was striking how many students reported enhanced relationships with others, including peers they had previously not known, or actively disliked. All but two focus group members (i.e. 10) shared positive feelings about working with others. As mentioned above, Mary had initially found working in the Turehu with people she didn’t know a challenge but ended up enjoying the experience. In response to this question, she mentioned a boy (“normally...really annoying and...just bug me”) who unexpectedly helped her in remembering her lines on one occasion. She came to realise that “you can rely on them to help you because they want the show to be as much of a success as you do.” This theme of mutual support was echoed by a number of the students, in particular the prompting of one another in instances where a line or cue had been forgotten. This spirit was summed by Candice, who said, “I learnt their lines too...in case they forget theirs I could just help them.” Christina noted that she had become good friends subsequent to the production with a girl who had reminded her of her lines, and Mary also reported friendships that had endured as the result of the mutual involvement in the show. Nisha had somewhat mixed feelings about this mutual dependency, that is, the sense that at any moment you might be called upon “to remind them what their line is and when to say it.” Only Angela expressed a negative view of working with others. In her case, this related to the scripting process where she felt disappointed that her own ideas were not taken up because the majority of students disagreed with them.

In one group, all students expressed surprise that the production had been the success it was. Christina said that she was “amazed that we could actually just the senior school...make something like that.” A number related this surprise to rehearsals, when very little seemed to be going right, when, as Amanda said, “no one was remembering their lines and everyone was freaking out.” A member of the second group, Mario, found it amazing that the audience “laughed and laughed and laughed” at something he considered to be only mildly funny. Students were surprised at other things: Christina was surprised that she could “actually act”; Jasmine was surprised that students took so long to learn lines; Candice was surprised at the extent to which costume and make-up could transform her appearance; and on this subject, Wiremu was surprised that *despite* the Turehu costumes, family members were able to recognise their offspring.

In summary, whilst all focus group students viewed their involvement in the production positively, a significant number found the rehearsals demanding and took them away from other enjoyable activities. These remarks were echoed when students commented on what they had found hard about the production, the most frequent response being the pressure to learn lines (with its associated anxiety) and the multiplicity of roles. Students found scripting a challenging process, in part because of the number of stakeholders (including teachers) who had an interest in the outcome and in part because of the nature of the content. Teachers were viewed as helpful for a number of reasons: facilitating the learning of lines, providing performance opportunities, and prompting and offering advice, especially in respect of “ad libbing”. A number of students referred to improvisation as both technique for scene creation and a means of dealing with “mistakes” and addressing performance anxiety, and clearly gained considerable satisfaction and enjoyment from developing confidence in this skill. There were also areas where teachers were found to be less than helpful, mainly in relation to

behaviours exhibited (for example, nagging) when they were feeling the pressure themselves. Three main reasons were offered by these students for finding the production memorable: connecting with a live audience, a specific aspect of the role they played, or a particular task that they had done to support the production in some way. Students were generally enthusiastic about what the production had taught them, allowing most of them to experience themselves in new and often surprising ways. Indeed, the production experience had a range of surprises for this group: that they actually pulled it off; that things actually came together; that the audience loved them. With just a couple of exceptions, they also enjoyed working with other students, with some developing new friendships as a result.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

For many years, all over New Zealand and other countries, young people have been involved in school productions where they have strutted their stuff as actors, dancers, singers, musicians and production helpers under the adoring gaze of parents and relatives and, where school finances allow, under actual spotlights. Behind the scenes, teachers and sometimes parent and community members have taken students through a production process which, while varying according to the type of show, has led to a public performance that we know will leave indelible memories in these students' minds. The experiences of Year 5/6 students in a collaboratively devised production, drawing on local history and based on theories of inquiry-based, integrated learning, have been our focus here. Their teachers' stories will be told on another occasion. We don't claim that this kind of devised production is typical of what happens in New Zealand primary schools, but we know from our own experience that it is not unique.

Student learning

The fifth overarching project question explored what primary students identified as helping or not helping them to develop a scene on a given topic for an integrated school production? As we have seen, the questionnaire data drawn from 108 students offered a broad perspective on this question, while the focus group data, contributed to by 12 students, offered a series of individual close-ups on what the production experience was like, as well as some trends.

Across the board, the students mentioned a number of challenges they experienced, some specific to their actual role (such as learning a new dance), others more general and related to task management and the learning of lines. Focus group students tended to be drawn from the large number of students who took on multiple roles. They also spoke of the pressure to learn lines and its attendant anxiety, and the challenge of the scripting process. In general, however, students indicated a wide range of learnings, in particular aspects of acting and self-management (overcoming fear and moderating behaviour), and these were reflected in the sorts of advice they were willing to pass on to other students involved in a similar enterprise. They were also captivated by what they discovered about the history of their own Woody Valley. Focus group students were enthusiastic about what the production involvement had taught them in terms of increased self-knowledge and self-efficacy (though they didn't use this word).

Scripting a scene was a new experience for these students (and, as we report elsewhere, for their teachers). How the process was undertaken and the degree and type of student involvement varied from class to class. However, the inquiry process that all classes

undertook was crucial in feeding content into the scripting process and, as one of the focus group students indicated, added an additional constraint. Writers had to be “true” to the historical record. Focus group students suggested that their teachers had been helpful to them in the learning of lines, facilitating performance opportunities and, of particular interest to us, encouraging and even legitimizing ad libbing (improvisation) as a tool to be used in workshoping a script and in covering up memory lapses in the act of performance itself. For these students, the power of improvisation seemed to be a revelation and was a crucial element in their enhanced self-confidence and reduced anxiety. As we interpret it, the legitimization of improvisation was also an indication of a sense the students had of “co-owning” the script with their teachers, even though teachers tended to be viewed as having the last word on what was included – something some focus group members found hard to accept. That some students found teacher intervention in the scripting process an issue tellingly suggests that they felt a considerable degree of ownership of the script, something we believe would not be the case in a situation where students engaged in a school production were presented with “the script” by their teachers.

It is not surprising that in their reflections on what their teachers might have done differently, the children focused on the relational rather than on the scene development process. After all, they had no yardstick for how this should be conducted. While there were few adverse comments about teachers in the questionnaire responses, focus group students drew attention to ways in which their teachers’ behaviour appeared to be affected by stress and reflected in such things as “nagging”.

Student enjoyment

The sixth overarching project question explored what primary students identified as enjoyable or memorable in developing a scene on a given topic for an integrated school production? While an 87% enjoyment rating is something to be celebrated, we wonder about the “invisible” 13% who on the face of it seemed disengaged. A school production like this always comes with costs and benefits. Even the focus group students, who in the main were highly involved, reported conflicts of interest caused by the production’s taking precedence over other enjoyable activities. A number of students indicated no contribution at all to their class’s scene development process, while others felt that their ideas were insufficiently heeded. Knowing the difficulty of enabling an equitable contribution from all students in a class of 30, we see this “down side” as predictable and perhaps inevitable.

Overall, all students identified at least one aspect of the production they found enjoyable. Students in general and focus group students drew attention, in particular, to performing as a positive experience (or “buzz”) and to a particular treasured moment in the performance itself. Focus group students drew special attention to the experience of connecting with a live audience. The theme of connection is, we believe, an important one. The production experience clearly gave these students an opportunity to *connect* with one another (and their teachers) in a special way. Working with others was one of the positive themes to be identified in the questionnaire data. The same occurred with focus group students, a number of whom formed enduring friendships with students from other classes as a result of the production experience.

Finally...

...this production was conceived as an enterprise where students and teacher worked together to mine the history of their valley for nuggets that would contribute to the devising of scenes in a production. In the process of scene development itself and in the final outcome, different domains of knowledge and ways of knowing were integrated. The process allowed for a large range of contributions representing different ways of engaging with or making sense of the world. For a number of students, the making of props was a high point and they saw their contribution as important as those who danced, sang or spoke on stage. For others, their major contribution was in the composition of music for the show. For still others, their contribution was in working backstage, ensuring that props were in place and on time. All were caught up in an enterprise that, perhaps to their surprise, deeply resonated with their community. We give the last word to a parent: "Congratulations to the school for presenting such a wonderful show: *Mokoroa: Guardian of the Valley*. We enjoyed it so much, we returned the next night to see it again! The children and staff beautifully recreated a piece of history with a holistic viewpoint. You masterfully captured snippets of the past and infused it with a deep sense of connection to the land."

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- [1] Psuedonyms have been used throughout to protect the anonymity of the school and participants.
- [2] “People of the land”, one term for the indigenous Maori people of New Zealand/Aoteroa.
- [3] In fact, one of the classes was a Year 4/5 composite.
- [4] Not necessarily Rachel’s since at times teachers worked in pairs with two classes.
- [5] We are not including findings from Question 6 here, because they were found to effectively duplicate Question 3, i.e. students treated “enjoyable” and “memorable” as synonyms.
- [6] Mary also had a key role at the very start of the production’s musical prologue where she played a traditional Maori “signaling” instrument (Flintoff, 2004, p. 48), a sacred conch shell. This task weighed heavily on her because the instrument is not an easy one to play.

Appendix 1: Student questionnaire (post production)

1. What part did you play in this production?
2. Answer this question if you helped in some way to develop one of your class’s scenes. What were some activities you did that *helped* you develop your ideas for your scene?
3. What are some things you learnt to *do* by being involved in this production?
4. What did you enjoy the most about working on the production?
5. What was the most challenging thing about being in the production?
6. When you think about the production, what do you remember most about it?
7. If you were giving advice to someone who was going to be involved in a school production like this, what would you say?

Here is a list of statements followed by a rating scale of 0-5.

If you strongly agree with a statement, circle 5. If you strongly disagree, circle 0. Or choose a number in between.

STRONGLY DISAGREE.....STRONGLY AGREE

I enjoyed being in this production	0	1	2	3	4	5
I would like to do it again	0	1	2	3	4	5
I learned new things about performing	0	1	2	3	4	5
I learned new stories about our valley	0	1	2	3	4	5
I used my own ideas in the performance	0	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix 2: Student focus group questions (post production)

1. Tell us some of the things you felt about the whole production process.
2. What was it like developing your scenes? What did you learn about making up a scene and putting it on?
3. Was there something your teacher did that you found helpful?
4. Is there something that you would have liked done differently? Maybe something you would have liked your teacher to do?
5. When you look back over the whole process what do you remember most?
6. What was the most difficult bit – what made it hard?
7. Did being in this show teach you anything about yourself? Or other people?
8. What was it like working with other people on the production?
9. What surprised you about the production?

Appendix 3: The overall shape of the production

Mokoroa: Guardian of the Valley	
Prologue	Marimba piece, “In the beginning” and dance
<i>Student narration</i>	
Scene 1: Rm 10	The Legend of Mokoroa
	<i>Student narration</i>
Interlude 1	<i>Turehu discover Mokoroa and they bring him back to life. Karanga (traditional call). Marimba group: Dance 31 with movement</i>
<i>Student narration</i>	
Scene 2: Rm 8	Pa life 1820s and first contact with the Europeans
<i>Student narration</i>	
Interlude 2	<i>Turehu respond to the settlers</i>
<i>Student narration</i>	
Scene 3: Rm 2	Pioneer Hardship: 1860s
<i>Student narration</i>	
Interlude 3	<i>Plea to the Gods</i>
<i>Student narration</i>	
Scene 4: Rm 10	The Sinking of the <i>Orpheus</i> , 1863
<i>Student narration</i>	
Interlude 4	<i>Distress and regret</i>
<i>Student narration</i>	

Scene 5: Rm 10	The destruction of the forest through the milling industry: Late 19C.
	<i>Student narration</i>
Interlude 5	<i>Eagles “No more walks in the woods” and turehu dance</i>
INTERVAL	
	<i>Student narration</i>
Scene 6: Rm 8	Dalmatian life in the early decades of the Twentieth Century
	<i>Student narration</i>
Interlude 6	<i>The Turehu engage in a spirited debate about the acceptability of these new plants that are appearing in Aotearoa. Mokoroa receives an expected message from Tane Mahuta.</i>
	<i>Student narration</i>
Scene 7: Rm 1	The great landfill battle of 1973
	<i>Student narration</i>
Interlude 7	<i>Rainforest song – marimba piece with improvised interludes</i>
	<i>Student narration</i>
Scene 8: Rm 2	At HVPS
	<i>Student narration</i>
Epilogue	<i>“Care for the earth” in Te Reo and English song and instrumental piece</i>

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