



Gender and Education in Luxembourg and Beyond

Local Challenges and New Perspectives

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Exploring yourself, others, and the world through drama and theatre

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Gender and Education in Luxembourg and Beyond: Local Challenges and New Perspectives Herausgegeben von Sylvie Kerger, Laurence Brasseur



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Who am I? Who could I be? Who are we as community?

Reflections about us, our relationships, and our behaviour as individuals and citizens inspire many, if not most, works of art and drama. Artists and actors explore and (re-)imagine characteristics of identities, human behaviour, and social dynamics. In a theatrical performance, the stage is an arena for imagination and aspiration, often intended to inspire the audience to (actively and critically) reflect on both individual and societal practices, values – and life in general. Similarly, education can be understood as a journey of active discovery and critical analysis that should offer opportunities for acquiring new knowledge, inspiration, and possibilities of being. As a pedagogical approach that is in line with this understanding, a humanising pedagogy (Freire, 2017) advocates for personal empowerment and social transformation through dedicated time and space for the learners' voice, autonomy, and emancipation.

Education in Freire's sense may act as a catalyst for individual and social change. Together with drama and theatre activities, as I will argue in this contribution, it may then provide opportunities for meaningful learning about gender. In fact, both a humanising approach to education as well as drama and theatre involve learning and teaching practices based on dialogic and participatory processes between students and teachers that encourage shared ownership, interdependence, and inquisitiveness. Consequently, social realities and gender-related issues, concepts, and perspectives may be scrutinised together as a classroom community.

Considering these potential affordances, this chapter will focus on how drama and theatre may facilitate explorations, discussions, and critical reflections on sexuality, gender, and related discourses on both a theoretical and very practical level. I will investigate in particular the whole-body and emotional engagement of dramatic experiences that may offer promising learning endeavours. The data that this contribution uses draws from a case study on a theatre project of a primary school class in Luxembourg City thoroughly discussed in Weyer (2019). For the purpose of this chapter, I have revisited interview recordings, transcripts, and video ethnographic data with an attempt to explore perspectives relatable to gender and pedagogy. Before I turn to the consideration of three possible levels of enquiry, namely an individual, intergroup, and social perspective, I briefly highlight learning and teaching opportunities in relation to gender that may come along with drama and theatre.

Drama and theatre in the classroom: 'Imitating real life'

Of all art disciplines, drama and theatre¹ in particular provide purposeful learning and teaching practices that may foster dialogue, openness, empathy, and trust in oneself and others (Byram & Fleming, 1998; Domkowsky & Walter, 2012; Weyer, 2019). In this re-

A distinction between drama and theatre can be drawn (for a discussion see Tschurtschenthaler, 2013, pp. 20–37). I here focus on pedagogical implications that may come along with both drama in education (as process-oriented teaching method) and theatre in education (with a focus on a performative interpretation of a scripted play for an audience).

spect, drama and theatre are described as powerful learning and teaching tools (Moore, 2004) and 'an imitation of real life' (Fleming, 2004, p. 115). Scientific interest has mainly focused on drama-based pedagogy to facilitate foreign language learning and teaching (Tschurtschenthaler, 2013), personal growth (McLauchlan & Winters, 2014), and intercultural understanding (Fleming, 2002). As several studies demonstrate, drama and theatre activities in the classroom may thus have an impact on an individual and interpersonal level.

While subjected to empirical research only scarcely, academic literature focusing on drama/theatre in education and gender provides promising insights into pedagogical opportunities. In a study published by an international consortium (DICE Consortium/Cziboly, 2010), for example, the authors suggest that drama and theatre activities give students the possibility 'to experiment with gender roles and norms [... and] to experience how it would be if they were someone else' (p. 66). These findings and the association to verbs such as 'to experiment' and 'to experience' highlight a first central assumption in relation to the effects of drama and theatre in education: the performative nature of drama and theatre may encourage learners to explore sexuality, gender, and related discourses in a practical manner.

In line with this perspective, scholars often emphasise that drama and theatre facilitate learning and teaching that incorporates physical and emotional engagement (Griffiths, 1990; McNaughton, 2011). In particular, the physicality inherent in dramatic role-play may broaden and intensify learning and teaching processes. In fact, drama provides 'rich, empowering poetic moments in which a wide range of language and other symbolic forms, perspectives, emotions, and interpretations can be purposefully mingled and entertained as students have opportunities to linguistically, aesthetically, and imaginatively engage in active interaction with one another' (Belliveau & Kim, 2013, p. 20). These 'rich and empowering moments' may then act as door opener for classroom discussions, debates, and discoveries on topics such as gender equality, empowerment, and human rights.

Indeed, authors such as Bateman and Coetzee (2018) argue that drama-based strategies can be used 'to stimulate critical inquiry into constructs of power, gender, and sexual orientation' (p. 124). Similarly, Olliff (2001) depicts the (secondary) drama classroom as 'powerful arena for exploring the politics of gender' (p. 223). Thus, drama and theatre may create opportunities for analysing, assessing, and understanding gender-related matters, ideally in a learning environment characterised by interpersonal care, active enquiry, and intellectual curiosity (Masuchika Boldt, 2004). Accordingly, as a second assumption, drama and theatre in the classroom may help teachers to facilitate discussions and critical reflections on sexuality, gender, and related discourses on a theoretical level.

Taken together, drama and theatre can facilitate the exploration of gender theory and praxis in the classroom and enhance learning on a physical, emotional, and cognitive level. Against this backdrop, and as I will further explore in the following sections, drama and theatre may pave the way for meaningful teaching strategies and learning experiences that can impact attitudes, values, and behaviour in relation to gender on an individual, interpersonal, and even societal level.

Promoting enquiry within spaces of embodied experience

In relation to drama and theatre, role-play in particular is an informative activity for teaching and learning. The action of role-playing demands the learner to put themselves in someone else's shoes. Developing and enacting a character convincingly may then facilitate a change of perspective that allows the learners to construct their own understanding and meanings of various life situations, derived either from imaginary situations or from the re-creation of students' own experiences (Griffiths, 1990). A reflection of this experience both from their own perspective (as self-reflection) and from that of their adopted role may allow the students 'to sympathise and even to empathise with the characters and their situations' (McNaughton, 2011, p. 127).

In the context of role-playing exercises, learning is facilitated through whole-body and emotional engagement which may eventually lead to an empathetic involvement as well (Aden, 2013). I argue that this potential is particularly interesting for teaching and learning about gender, as I will illustrate with a first example drawn from a theatre project developed by a fourth grade primary school class in Luxembourg City (see Weyer, 2019).

In the school year 2016/2017 and over the period of six months, Sarah², the teacher, decided to prepare a public theatre performance with her fourteen pupils aged ten to eleven years. She chose a book written by Bonnet and Simon (2007) as inspiration and starting point of the project: 'Où sont passés les princes charmants?' ('Where are the Prince Charmings?'). In short, this novel tells the story of three popular fairy tale princesses, who are searching for their mysteriously disappeared Prince Charmings. At the beginning of the theatre project, the pupils had to transform this narrative into a play and, therefore, develop a myriad of fictional roles that they had to perform on stage later on.

While most of the pupils quickly decided on which role they wanted to develop and play, Océane hesitated for weeks. Partly due to her shy and insecure personality, as Sarah characterised Océane at the beginning of the project, she first decided to play the narrator – a role that allowed her to remain (unseen) behind the scenes, in a safe environment that mainly required her to read several lines out loud to structure the storyline for the audience. After several weeks of rehearsal, and after one of the pupils changed schools, the role of one of the princes had to be reallocated. Océane, who meanwhile learned to overcome her shyness and stage fright through various drama exercises, seized the opportunity and asked Sarah if she could play a prince. Initial doubts about whether a girl is able to play a boy's role were soon dispelled – 'in theatre everything is possible!', as Sarah and a professional theatre pedagogue who assisted with the project development used to argue regularly.

For months, Océane then engaged with – and regularly experienced – the task of 'playing a prince' and 'being a boy'. As part of several character development assignments, and her general training as an actress, she had to deal with questions such as: 'How do I walk as a prince?', 'What emotions do I have?', 'Am I allowed to cry as a

2 All names in this chapter are pseudonyms.

boy?', 'How can I convincingly express these feelings?'. As a result, Océane used her entire body as a meaning-making agent, typical to drama (Aden, 2013).

After the public performance of the play, Océane commented on what she had learned most from the theatre project in retrospect:

Océane: I learned to be a boy. ((smiles))

Author: Was that nice or not?

Océane: Yes ((smiles)) - my parents said to me that it was good to also learn something else

than being a girl all the time – to also know how that feels.

Océane's answer demonstrates amongst others that the discovery of, and reflection on, the opposite sex may be encouraged by the teacher and even the parents of the learner. In regard to gender and education, the brief reference to Océane's (self-declared) learning experience also refers to a possible impact of the physical aspect of experiences in drama and theatre. By developing and performing the role of a prince, Océane learned a range of symbolic activities such as ways of moving, talking, interacting, – and 'being a boy'. For McNaughton (2011), this finding might not be particularly surprising, as drama in education here allowed Océane and other pupils to get 'personally involved with the imaginary context and [...] identify with the characters that they have developed' (p. 127).

In combination with classroom discussions, learning about gender here thus took place due to 'potentially illuminating juxtaposition in the drama classroom of the performative mode with the non-performative, meaning that "natural" and "acted" behaviour can be compared, contrasted and interrogated' (Olliff, 2001, p. 224). It is important to note, that some of the character traits that Océane and other pupils had chosen for their role to represent 'masculinity' or 'femininity' would need to be critically examined in class to not promote described roles and common stereotypes, a major risk in performing gender in drama and theatre that van Wyk (2014) calls attention to. Indeed, the full potential of character development and role-play should lie beyond a binary perspective on sexual identity and a boy/girl dichotomy. Most importantly, role-play may then allow a change of perspective and, thereby, offer an impulse for discussion and reflection on gender.

While Océane's experience here briefly and exemplary illustrates learning in relation to gender on an individual level, drama and theatre may also affect learning about behavioural norms and gender stereotypes on a group level.

Empowering learners within spaces of possibility

Stereotypes, in general, can be viewed as a cause of separation, discrimination, and a barrier to social justice. Gender stereotypes, more specifically, are defined as 'a generalised view or preconception about attributes or characteristics, or the roles that are or ought to be possessed by, or performed by women and men.' (OHCHR, n.d.) Research has shown that gender stereotypes in classroom contexts affect boys' and girls' understanding about how to be 'boys' and how to be 'girls' all around the globe (Blum et al., 2017), and shape children's interests and aspirations by the age of six already (Bian et al., 2017). Persisting stereotypes linked to gender in particular discourage women's personal aspirations and their pursuit of prestigious careers, as they may feel less intelligent compared to boys (Bian et al., 2017). With this in mind, drama work can provide opportunities to address gender stereotypes both within fictional and nonfictional contexts. Dramatic improvisation exercises and role-play experiences, for example, offer strong impetus, space, and time for individual and group learning about gender.

Within the theatre project developed by Sarah and her pupils, three princesses search for their princes who disappeared mysteriously. In a series of adventurous episodes, the princesses repeatedly take risks, leave their comfort zones, and eventually succeed in finding and rescuing their princes. Right from the beginning, Sarah thus selected a storyline as basis for the collaborative theatre project that attributes heroism, bravery, and courage to the leading *female* roles.

At that time, Sarah's choice to stage a play that celebrates, amongst others, brave women may have been made with no direct reference to (the critical reflection on) gender stereotypes. In fact, among Sarah's main pedagogical objectives were the promotion of language learning through drama and the realisation of a common, student-centred project (see Weyer, 2019, pp. 85–86). Nonetheless, I argue that both the decision to integrate drama exercises in the school routine as well as the fictional context itself can be seen as powerful tools and a good basis to critically scrutinise and dismantle common gender stereotypes in the context of everyday school life, both on a personal and interpersonal level.

First, the pupils were given the opportunity to learn that the notions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' should not be understood as including a fixed set of behaviours. As part of the theoretical development of their fictional roles and during practical role-playing exercises, the pupils experienced that character traits such as being autonomous, hard, strong, active, and emotional can be performed by both girls and boys. For a start, this hands-on in-role experience may have helped to overstep binary stereotypes, at least within the fictional context. In regular group discussion rounds and debriefings, the pupils' experiences can then support group work and critical incident reflections (Tripp, 1993) on topics such as gender stereotypes. Thus, (fictional) drama events and everyday (real) life can be related to each other.

Second, right from the beginning Sarah created a learning and teaching environment in which her pupils were given regular opportunities to redefine what they were capable of doing. Within the drama lessons, she positioned herself as a 'teacher-student with student-teachers' (Freire, 2017, p. 53) and offered her pupils time and space to feel 'at

promise' (Wright, 2011) both in the fictional and the real (classroom) world. Using the fairy tale storyline as example, the pupils acknowledged the fact that the princesses rescue the princes during an adventurous, risky journey. Thereby, the fictional context provided a meaningful context and real purposes for the learners (McNaughton, 2011). For the three girls playing the princesses, this learning experience allowed them to actively experience being a 'brave rescuer' and to reflect on their positions.

If well planned, teachers can broaden and facilitate the debate to include gender theories so as to promote, in this example, the three girls' confidence, self-worth, and belief that they have the capability to be brave and courageous outside the fictional context too. This may foster a feeling of believing in oneself and one's skills – qualities that are essential in empowerment theories (Kirk et al., 2017).³

Overall, and beyond lessons for an individual student, drama and theatre as creative processes can enable classroom communities to explore and reshape 'who we are and how we live together' (Greenwood, 2001, pp. 199–200), as I will further demonstrate with a third and last example.

Celebrating diversity within spaces of sociality

If we speak about gender, 'we are speaking about us [...,] our body, our feelings and experiences, our behavior and our desire' (Baltes-Löhr, 2018, p. 29). As I have argued so far, drama and theatre can provide a safe space to (re-)discover these aspects, such as one's – and others' – bodies, feelings, and desires, while also exploring new possibilities of being (e.g. being a boy or being a heroic princess). The impact of drama and theatre then lies beyond an individual level. In fact, a significant body of research emphasises the positive influence of drama and theatre engagement on a wider group level. In this respect, scholars have identified positive effects on interpersonal relationships, empathy and tolerance towards others, as well as on social cohesion within and between communities. Studies even found that students who regularly engage in drama and theatre feel more confident and are more tolerant and sympathetic towards diversity (DICE Consortium/Cziboly, 2010). In light of these findings, I return to the theatre project, in which fourteen pupils with their teacher managed to work collaboratively and productively as a team towards their public performance.

Over the period of nine months, and as integral part of their rehearsal activities, both the teacher and all the pupils learned to respect, protect, and even promote myriads of opinions, feelings, and desires. In each theatre lesson, Sarah deliberately included open discussion rounds to facilitate open and honest dialogue. Thereby, she promoted mutual respect by offering the pupils both space and time to share opinions and ideas, talk about difficulties and concerns, and openly criticise and reflect upon specific decisions taken by the teacher or fellow pupils. Thus, Sarah valued the pupils as 'knowers' (Huer-

³ The pupils played the story publicly on stage and, thereby, presented it to a wider audience. While beyond the scope of analysis here, this public performance may have broadened the reflection on gender stereotypes beyond the school community.

ta, 2011) with diverse competences, and created a learning culture that values responsibility, autonomy, and control.

In day-to-day school life, the inclusion of various perspectives and diverse identities may often be challenging for teachers. In drama and theatre, however, classroom work is usually grounded in a premise of positive interdependence. In this context, embracing diversity and shared commitment can be seen as vital for the successful development of a play. As Sarah continuously demonstrated, the contribution and talent of every individual can be acknowledged and valued in drama and theatre classes. This may provide 'room for students with different talents to contribute to the overall outcome, which can help to motivate heterogeneous learner groups' (Giebert, 2014, para. 21). As a result, Sarah, together with her pupils, demonstrated a readiness and outcome of a positive we-relationship within a classroom environment that may promote, in similar projects, heterogeneity and (gender) diversity as an opportunity rather than a burden.

Accordingly, Sarah set a good example of how learning and teaching can be explored actively and collaboratively with the pupils. By experiencing first-hand that working together can be individually and collectively beneficial, the pupils and the teacher also got to know each other better as human beings. As Sarah herself stated at the end of the theatre project:

Sarah: What I notice is that the pupils have become more open-minded and cooperative

- [...] the social cohesion between the pupils has strongly developed this is amazing
- [...] in the school yard I now even see the girls playing with the boys not anymore as two separate groups .

Author: Do you think this is because of the theatre project?

Sarah: Yes.

Due to the various roles and responsibilities within the drama context, the pupils have had the opportunity to create new (fictional and real) alliances, relations, and mutual interdependencies. Indeed, in drama '[l]earners will often move together, and explore relationships though their physical proximity, posture and gesture. This, the evidence suggests, brings them closer as learners and as human beings' (McNaughton, 2011, p. 129). Both in the classroom and on stage – a space outside the premises of the school building – the pupils and their teacher came closer together and experienced practical possibilities of how to deal with diversity.

Consequently, drama and theatre exercises have allowed the pupils and their teacher to expand what the classroom community and we understand as community through democratic 'spaces of sociality' (Singh, 2004). Given these points, I suggest that drama conventions may help enhance learning and teaching in respect to tolerance, solidarity,

and diversity – themes that can be related to gender theories and explored in practical enquiries in the classroom with a societal perspective.

Conclusion: Drama and theatre as a catalyst for holistic learning about gender

Learning about who we are, who we could be, or who we want to be is an important task of education. In this contribution, I suggest that drama and theatre can give valuable impetus for teaching and learning about yourself, others, and the world – and, thereby, also about gender. Within a humanising approach to education that I adopt, and argue in favour of, in this chapter, drama and theatre can facilitate learning and teaching about gender both theoretically and practically, with 'head, heart, hands and feet' (Schewe, 2016). Regular engagement with drama and theatre exercises may then offer time and space in the classroom for communication, dialogue, and shared experience. This may promote both the motivation and curiosity to learn about gender.

With its social dimension and its 'emphasis on the human condition' (Bateman & Coetzee, 2018, p. 124), drama and theatre provide room for both individual discovery ('Who am I?', 'Who could I be?') and collective reflection ('Who are we as community?') by integrating each classroom community member's body and voice. Thus, every learner has the chance to (re)discover and question common (gender) roles and assumptions. Through verbal and embodied interactions, gender can be made explicit and explored not only a theoretical level by 'thinking through', but additionally by 'feeling through' and 'being through' (Bateman & Coetzee, 2018).

While performative work such as dramatic writing, character development, and roleplay do not necessarily give final answers to the questions of who we are or could be, the engagement with dramatic play and theatrical representation may facilitate, at least, a collaborative and enjoyable enquiry into gender, identity, and belonging in and out of role. In this context, the brief examples taken from a school theatre project developed in Luxembourg City may only scratch the surface of a full range of educational potentialities that come with drama and theatre.

As Masuchika Boldt (2004, p. 20) suggests, the goal to explore (the workings of) gender in the classroom and beyond should not be seen as 'grand gender revolutions' but as something we all can do. What I have tried to put forward in this chapter is the consideration of drama and theatre as offering vital impulses for learning about gender, heightening gender awareness, and embracing the uniqueness of all individuals. Ultimately, creative dramatic experiences and associated practices may then have an impact beyond the four walls of the classroom and promote Freire's educational work to empower people and create a just world, 'one in which all human beings could actively contribute to their community and society in general' (Veugelers, 2017, p. 410).

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