



The Drama Space as Companion: Students' Perspectives on Mental Health in Upper Secondary Drama Education

Ellen Foyn Bruun

Associate Professor of Drama and Theatre, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU Trondheim
ellen.bruun@ntnu.no

Jorid Bakken Steigum

Drama lecturer, Special Advisor, VIP Mental Health in Schools, Vestre Viken Hospital Trust
Jorid.Bakken.Steigum@vestreviken.no

Abstract

Purpose: The study investigates how drama students in Norwegian upper secondary education understand their learning experiences in the drama space in relation to their perspectives on mental health.

Design/Methodology: Based on 14 semi-structured interviews, the data stem from a research project conducted between 2020–2022. The qualitative data were analysed thematically by the research team, which consisted of two experienced drama educators.

Findings: The study demonstrates that the drama space is embedded with opportunities for the students to experience and reflect on subjective mental health in useful ways for developing life skills and personal insight. The findings indicate that the students perceive the drama space as an inviting and actively co-creating companion that induces complex, entangled meaning making and transformative learning, transgressing the formal educational aims of the curriculum.

Originality: According to the findings, the educational context of learning the art form of drama and theatre offers a mental health related by-product that supports the students' sense of self and drive for wellbeing.

Keywords

drama space, mental health, upper secondary education, drama/theatre, spatial entanglements, temenos.

Introduction

It must be the freedom of the space.
I feel that the room itself helped me to understand.
(current student, 10)

In recent years, there has been increased attention paid to young people's mental health in education and in general (Andersen, 2016; Bakken, 2019; Bru et al., 2016). Since 2020, public health and life skills represent an overall theme to be incorporated in all subjects in Norwegian education (Fagfornyelsen, 2020). With this shift, the sharp divide between learning and personal development seems softened. As drama and theatre researchers and educators, we welcome this development by its holistic pedagogical intentions. It resonates with the arts, promoting aesthetic learning processes that integrate doing, thinking, and feeling. Simultaneously for some decades now, the interdisciplinary research field that addresses

arts and health has grown and established itself worldwide (Daykin et al., 2008; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). There is extensive research addressing drama and theatre for promoting health and well-being, most often focusing on people at risk of exclusion (Bruun, 2019; Jennings & Holmwood, 2016; Torrissen & Stickley, 2018; Ørjasæter et al., 2018). There has, however, been less focus on mainstream drama education and drama students' perspectives on mental health in relation to their learning experiences in the drama space.

The authors of this article have extensive experience as drama teachers in various contexts. Ellen Foyn Bruun is Associate Professor of drama and theatre at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, with a particular research interest in drama, theatre, and health. Jorid Bakken Steigum has broad experience from Norwegian upper-secondary education and works as special adviser at VIP Mental Health in Schools, at Vestre Viken Hospital Trust (VIP Psykisk helse i skolen, 2022). Some years ago, we conducted two all-day courses for around 50 drama teachers in two different parts of Norway, which addressed the relationship between mental health and drama education specifically (Bruun & Steigum, 2019). The conversations with the teachers confirmed it would be important to address this theme through research. To that end, we decided to conduct a qualitative study with focus on upper secondary drama education.

The three-year Norwegian A-levels programme in drama¹ prepares students aged 16–19 for higher education. The course expects students to commit fully to the academic and experiential learning processes. The first year is taught together with music and dance as an introductory year for the performing arts. Then in years two and three, the students specialise in drama, dance or music. In drama, the main course module during all three years is theatre production with emphasis on ensemble work. Other modules include applied theatre practices, movement for stage, theatre history and theory. Improvisation and practical theatre skills are developed progressively throughout the three years. The Norwegian model uses the overall concept of drama to embrace all forms of theatrical practice, with or without an audience. Whether from a proscenium stage, in a studio/black box, outdoor or in an ordinary classroom, the drama classroom entails exploration of imaginary spaces – of *as-if* reality. The spatial notion of drama intrinsically encompasses the otherness of the 'magical' and imagined space of play (Winnicott, 1971). In sum, the map of the drama learning space covers many physical and inner mental landscapes. It constantly moves between and intertwines the correlations of the daily reality and the imaginary *as-if* of play. We introduce the term *drama space* to encompass the complexity of this spatial topography. The research question we address in this article is: How do drama students in upper secondary education make meaning of the drama space in relation to mental health?

First, we introduce the conceptual framework drawing on contemporary feminist philosophy known as new materialism and agential realism (Barad, 2003; Bogart, 2021). Meaning making is understood here as a constantly ongoing, multi-layered process and therefore resonates well with aesthetical learning processes in being holistic and emergent. We combine this performative ontological stance with our understanding of the salutogenic health concept (Antonovsky, 1985; Eriksson, 2017). Secondly, we present the methodological approach, including ethical considerations and an overview of the analytical process. Thirdly, we present *the drama space as companion*, identifying three intra-acting spatial entanglements, and finally, we discuss the drama space as companion with Anne Bogart's (2021) proposal of the Greek notion of *temenos* as an inner companion that stays with the individual beyond the *as-if* experience.

1 <https://www.vilbli.no/nb/nb/no/musikk-dans-og-drama/program/v.md>

Theoretical framework

For the theoretical framework, we draw on new materialist thinking, inspired by feminist thinkers like Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2014) and Donna Haraway (2016). This post-humanistic line of thinking understands that all phenomena are connected and influence each other continuously as ripples in the water. Consequently, living is understood as a complex performative event where knowing and knowledge are entangled and emergent of ongoing subjective meaning production. The idea of life as a stage and performance is old and discussed by 20th century thinkers such as Erving Goffman (1971). The recognition of the “stage” itself as emergent, performative, and discursive is however more emphasised in the 21st century. The meanings of health have also differed throughout history, and different conceptions of mental health exist (Galderisi et al., 2015; Keyes, 2007). We lean on the salutogenic model of mental health (Antonovsky, 1985; Eriksson, 2017; Mittelmark et al., 2017). In this model, health is regarded as a continuum between ease and dis-ease, and we all move between the imaginary poles of total wellness and total illness. Mental health is here understood as a process related to our capacity to use the resources available (Eriksson, 2017, p. 93). The key concept, originally introduced by Aron Antonovsky (1985), is *sense of coherence*, which resonates well with aesthetic and holistic learning processes aiming to integrate body, mind, and feelings. With a strong sense of coherence, the challenges in life are worth investing energy in, and “one feels that life makes sense emotionally” (Mjøsund & Eriksson, 2021, p. 190).

In the context of our study, mainstream education, it seemed particularly relevant to note that mentally healthy people feel socially and mentally competent and are described to be emotionally stable and able to cope with problems and crises (Mjøsund & Eriksson, 2021, p. 188). We were curious about how the participants would reflect on and share their personal understanding of how they perceived the connection between the drama space and mental health. In line with Barad’s agential realism (2003, p. 810; 2007), all meaning production takes place as continuous entangled co-creation with the world. This means that the participants’ experiential and reflective meaning making can be seen as a mutual dance between themselves and the drama space. It echoes the legacy of arts education that understands art as a way of knowing, performative and continuously emergent of subjective meaning production (Ross, 2013). However, agential realism expands the notion of dancing partners to both humans and non-humans. All partners are regarded as bearers of potential agencies because “agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfiguring of the world” (Barad, 2003, p. 818). Agential realism reminds us that nothing is created in a vacuum and that the drama space itself is bearer and producer of meaning.

The relevance of agential realism for drama and theatre is picked up by American theatre director/scholar Anne Bogart (2021, p. 92), who points out that “our identities as well as moments of performance are always formed in ‘intra-action’”. Bogart (2021, p. 29) introduces the Greek word *temenos* signifying a safe and protected area cut off from busy everyday life. She describes *temenos* as “safe zones for renewal” and with reference to Carl Gustav Jung as “the safe spot ... where mental work can take place”. In this space, the psyche may address what is not yet known by the conscious mind, so-called shadow material (Bogart, 2021, p. 31).

Methodological approach

The data we explore in this study were gathered from qualitative interviews with seven former drama students (FS) and eleven current drama students (CS). The data are part of the research project that we conducted on the background of two courses we held for the drama

teachers (Bruun & Steigum, 2019). In the overall project, a third sample was included, six drama teachers, but these data are not referred to in this article. The former and current students represented three upper-secondary schools in different parts of Norway. They had all completed or were in year three of the A-levels programme. The current students were aged 18–19 and the former students around 30. The intention with the former students was to gain a broader perspective of the topic also over time. They were recruited through social media using Steigum's contacts from her work as a drama teacher around ten years earlier. To recruit the two groups of current students, we got help from their drama teachers, and the sample was put together by those who wished to participate.

We chose an explorative approach (Brekke & Willbergh, 2017) with the intention of generating various perspectives and details concerning the drama space and mental health. The purpose of explorative interview method is to have an open attitude and to be able to listen and create a situation for the interviewees to bring forward concrete stories and narratives (Kvale et al., 2009). As a warm-up and sensory tuning-in to the topic, the participants filled in a form in silence before the interview started. The form was inspired by an exercise in *The Viewpoints Book* (Bogart & Landau, 2005, p. 155). It started with “when I think of the drama space”, and continued: “I hear..., I smell..., I taste..., I feel..., I see..., I think...”. This was part of our exploratory approach aiming for different nuances relating to the phenomenon (Brekke & Willbergh, 2017).

The interviews were semi-structured with an interview guide that first invited the participants to tell their spontaneous thoughts on the juxtaposition of the drama space and mental health. This was followed up by looking into situations that the participants were comfortable to share as narratives from their lived experience (Van Manen, 2016) in the drama space. We encouraged them to elaborate on their perspectives on what they understood as supportive – or not – for their learning and mental health experience. The former students were interviewed by Steigum as three focus groups. Due to the pandemic, two of these was conducted digitally. Focus group interviews are often used in explorative studies because the collective dialogue may stimulate spontaneous exchange of words about common experience (Kvale et al., 2009, p. 162). Still, we chose to interview the two groups of current students individually because we wished to invite them to speak freely about what they wanted to in the confidential space. We divided the students between us, each visiting one school. With the help of their teachers, we were able to conduct the interviews during the students' school day. The allocated time for each individual interview was 45 minutes and around 60 minutes for the focus group interviews. As participants reflected a variety of genders, we will avoid gender specific pronouns in the following when we refer to the participants, including in direct quotations.

Ethical considerations

The overall research project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (*Norsk Senter for Forskningsdata*, 2021. Reference nr. 630204/2020) before it began. It was important for us to give clear information and emphasise that the participants could withdraw and have their information removed from the project at any time. It was explained that all information would be anonymised, including the names of the schools. Everybody gave written consent. We were particularly mindful around the interview situation with the current students because of the research topic relating to mental health. To get to know them a little and have some insight in what they were working with, we both visited “our” school before the interviews. We also considered our collaboration with the drama teachers important, seeking to ensure transparency and trust. During the interviews with all the participants, we aimed at listening empathically and being mindful of our communication with

them. To do this and reflect upon it, we found Norwegian psychologist Lisbeth Brudal's (2014) model for empathic communication useful with its suggestions about active listening and how to be present with others while addressing themes that relate to personal experience and feelings. We also experienced that this helped us being reflexively conscious of our own bias and personal experience with the topic.

Analytical process

For the thematic analysis we chose collective qualitative analysis as this is recommended by Norwegian social scientist Helga Eggebø (2020). Due to limited resources, we had agreed with the participants that they would not be involved once they had been interviewed. After we had transcribed the interviews with some support from our institutions, we had seven workshops during 2021 to chronologically work through the collective qualitative analysis in four steps as proposed by Eggebø (2020, pp. 112–117). First, we went through all the material together and then mapped the different themes that we interpreted from the data. The third step was to revisit and go deeper, to categorise and reveal main features – that is to identify findings as main themes directly from the data. The fourth step in Eggebø's model is to make a collective plan for writing research articles and publication. This last step enabled us to organise and manage our findings by laying out a plan for three co-written articles. Initially, we addressed the complete data collection, including the interviews with the six drama teachers, which is omitted here but will be addressed elsewhere.

Due to the pandemic, we alternated between meeting digitally and in person. Before each workshop we each made consistent preparations (Eggebø, 2020, p. 112), which could mean listening again to specific interviews and preparing keywords, themes, and drawings/post cards. To create the creative analytical space Eggebø (2020, p. 107) encourages, we complemented the analytical process with experiential arts-based methods (Leavy, 2009; O'Toole, 2006). This meant that we explored the narratives with our whole body as listeners, using the *as-if*. We created body sculptures and simple improvisations inspired by the stories we had been told, with the intention to differentiate our interpretation and gain a more embodied and affective understanding of the material. Throughout the whole analytical process and into the writing process we have alternated between and continuously reconsidered the parts and the whole (Alvesson & Skjöldberg, 2008, p. 193), and further taken into consideration that our professional experience would be of significance for our relationship with the participants and our interpretation of the material.

Eggebø emphasises that collective qualitative analysis runs parallel with the writing process and continuous review of the data in relation to relevant theory and existing research (2020, p. 118). Our aim was to let the data talk to us, listen to it and let us be led by it. For formulating the research question for this article, Eggebø's guidance was particularly useful because she encourages constantly reviewing the data creatively in the light of different theoretical perspectives. We discovered that our emerging analysis and discussion of how the students made sense of their experience of the drama space regarding mental health would need a conceptual framework and analytical lens that could transgress conventional distinctions and boundaries between arts, education, and health. To this end, the feminist legacy and new materialist thinking seemed appropriate as this would cater for the entangled complexity we discovered from the data.

Findings and discussion

As soon as we started interviewing it was clear to us that the participants had a lot of thoughts about the topic, and it seemed easy for them to talk about it. From

statements like “I felt the room itself helped me understand” (CS10), we understood that they perceived the physical framing of the drama space as a live, vibrant non-human agent. Their vivid description of the drama space indicated how important the space itself was for them. When we gathered the words from the sensory forms in tag clouds, we noticed that the associations referred to a variety of feeling states, such as *stress, joy, tension, sorrow, fun, play, anger, anxiety, managing, calm and restless, happiness, pressure, frustration, laughter, crying*. What struck us was the richness of images, suggesting experiential learning processes of personal intensity and depth. For many, the drama space associated with *home, potential space, very cosy place, new beginning, place for exploring, place for play*. Another thing we noticed was the common appreciation of the collective experience in the drama space with words like *belonging, community, good memories, warmth, my group, together, extreme love*. It seemed they experienced the drama space as somewhere to immerse experientially in exploring the complex relationship between everyday life and the expanded *as-if* reality, of who I am, who I have been, and who I can become.

From our analysis, we identified *the drama space as companion* as a main theme for how the participants seemed to understand the drama space as a live dance partner with which they intimately and ongoingly co-create personal meaning and knowledge. In line with agential realism, the notion of *inter*-action between parties is redefined with the notion of *intra*-action and unfolding entanglement (Barad, 2003). We detected three such intertwined mental health related entanglements.

First entanglement: the neutral space

With the lens of agential realism, no space is regarded neutral as all spaces are ongoingly charged with significance and expectations. Searching for neutrality, however, is part of basic drama training and the first step into the *as-if* reality (Murray, 2003). One could say that the search for neutrality is an anticipation *from* the drama space as a non-human agent. In our data, this was pertinent as a mental health related subtopic. Many students referred to the drama space as a “blank slate ... that we can colour” (CS10). From this we identified an understanding of the drama space as being emptied of preconceived expectations and norms from the outside world, and by this experienced as neutral and open. This common notion of openness further seemed to point to a unique and precious shared experience of intimacy. As one student asserted, “I believe that when you are inside the drama space you are very naked. You are very vulnerable” (CS9). One former student reflected on the permission they felt to do “odd” things, “... that I do something that, if anybody had seen it, would be super embarrassing and really strange. But we have laughed ourselves to death for two hours – a kind of secret that is good to have” (FS2).

The data revealed a significant common notion of the drama space as different from the ordinary school reality and classrooms. The drama space seemed to represent a cut off space, resonating with the notion of *temenos* as a space “protected and isolated from everyday living spaces” (Bogart, 2021, p. 30). One student described how they felt that the black box had its own emotional state that they felt drawn into, and where “things get another meaning” (CS10). All in all, the participants expressed that they could explore being together in a *different* way in the drama space and that this shared experience strengthened community and reciprocal understanding of each other. This first entanglement of neutrality also suggested that social roles and perceptions of self and others could be re-negotiated in the drama space because it was perceived as a free and non-judgemental space. Many mentioned that the ordinary social roles and status were perceived differently when gathering in the “drama circle” as equals, even with the teacher. There seemed to be a common agreement

and mental adjustment already before crossing the threshold into the physical drama space. For some, changing into loose black clothes provided the necessary transitional ritual to be ready to play and explore the *as-if*. As one former student stated, “the threshold for movement work and being an omelette was easier. You are already prepared” (FS2). There was further a common awareness and agreement that the drama space provides an opportunity to be exposed and be seen. Statements like, “you cannot camouflage yourself with the wall” (FS2) indicated that everyone is visible and *made* visible by the drama space.

Several students told us that being in the drama space allowed them to get a break from being someone with mental health issues (CS1,2,3). As researchers, we had no need to know if any or how many were faced with mental health related challenges. Some told us they were or had been. Others did not. In general, the participants expressed that mental health was acknowledged as “something” in the drama space in contrast to their general experience in other classes. This, they related to the cut-off-ness and freedom from the outside expectations and norms, with statements such as “when you go in there you are in a way completely clean” (CS9). For the few who disclosed that they had or had experienced mental health challenges, it was essential for their feeling of success that they felt trust and support from the teachers and co-students. With this, they would be able to deal with the mental health related issues arising. This kind of “therapeutic” by-product may be related to the *indirect* way emotional issues can be explored holistically in the *as-if* reality, cut off and protected from everyday preconceptions and stigma. Studies from applied theatre interventions aiming to promote mental health demonstrate similarly how the container of the art form itself may induce enhanced self-efficacy and well-being (Bruun, 2019; Ørjasæter et al., 2018). It was significant from our data that many participants pointed out that by being given the opportunity to explore new action patterns and dynamics, they would experience surprise and joy when “suddenly” experiencing themselves in a new way.

Second entanglement: the workspace

From the data, we understood that there could also be a risk of losing oneself in the drama space if there is no sense of direction. One student asserted that it could open “the lid wide open because it is kind of neutral it can be interpreted in many directions” (CS10). From the narratives, the formal workspace where the craft of drama and theatre is the focus came forward as a second spatial entanglement and necessary holding for play and creative explorations to take place safely. Listening to the students’ narratives, we recognised a common appreciation of the disciplined routines, firm boundaries and time structures comprised in drama and theatre programmes on this level of proficiency. As theatre production and ensemble work is such an important part of the three-year programme, the personal stories were often from these processes where everyone depends on everyone with specific roles and working functions. In a theatre ensemble everybody matters, from the main character to the props manager. As one student asserted:

[I]f I did not come to school one day my job would not be done. Important to feel acknowledged, that you contribute with something... . Learn to give and receive, take care of the group integrity, the common project we are working towards. Belonging, see results from the practical and concrete tasks, distribution of jobs. Feeling of mastery. (FS2)

Working with play texts or devised work, many told us how they felt they had been carried by the co-created collective energy to manage things they would not have dreamt about beforehand (CS11). They reflected convincingly about how they had learnt to endure the

aesthetic learning processes that could be chaotic and stressful at times and to tolerate the pressure and gain confidence to re-embark on new similar processes. The working alliance of the drama space for learning the craft of drama and theatre is not, in our view, in opposition to the openness of the neutral space. On the contrary, the working space offers tools and skills needed to be able to engage genuinely in the creative and mental processes.

Third entanglement: the transformative space

Based on our data, the entanglements of the neutral space and the working space may be understood as a prerequisite for enabling the creative imagination to become experientially transformative, hence the third entanglement was identified as the transformative space. To illustrate this, we choose the narrative of one student who chose to play a scene from a contemporary play about a young person who commits suicide. In the interview, they explained that it was hard to work with the scene in the beginning of rehearsals because they themselves had had such thoughts at a younger age. “In the beginning I was so involved that I relived the situations that I had been in myself, and I was a bit freaked out by that, so I just had to start again and find new ways to do it” (CS2). With the support of teachers and co-students, they found a way to work with the space and objects that helped them focus on the physical actions on stage rather than identifying too deeply with the character’s emotional state. With aesthetic distance, they developed a physical ritual with a large white cloth that enabled them to regulate emotionally as a performer. With creative imagination they built the *as-if* play space as a new spatial layer on the stage. They could then relate across the many layers of entangled meaning-creation. With enough emotional distance from their private “stuff” but still with enough contact with their own feelings, they could convey the experience of the character. The student asserted:

[I]t is my character of course who says it, so I feel that it is about several stories about the same fate cause my character has that fate in the end... . Now I have repeated it so many times that it is normal and because I have had those kinds of thoughts myself – it is not such a big deal. (CS2)

It seems the multi-layered performative drama space, physically and mentally, provided an opportunity for the student to discover new insight through their creative imagination. This seemed to bring them closer to themselves while also setting their former self into perspective emotionally. By performing the scene with their own choreography, the student experienced that they were able to distance themselves from their former self and simultaneously be able to share feelings and compassion of human existential suffering and dilemmas in general and relevant to everybody. And with this, they could sum up that “it is not such a big deal” (CS2). This resonates with the students’ overall experience that mental health is accepted as “something” in the drama space that they can acknowledge as part of their personal life.

Temenos: the space that stays

Finally, we look at how the drama space as companion resonates with the spatial notion of temenos (Bogart, 2021, pp. 30–31), not only as an “outer” but also as an “inner” companion. Many of the participants expressed that it was essential for their transformative and deep learning that they felt supported and encouraged to try out unfamiliar things that they did not believe they would manage beforehand. They revealed that the teachers often seemed to know what kind of hurdles they would be able to overcome before they realised it themselves (CS2, 7). In unison, they appreciated that the drama teachers took them seriously and

demanded that they worked hard and took risks. We understand this related to the importance of trust by allowing students personal space to experience and find out for themselves whatever they need to, including how they make sense of their mental health experience at any given point. As Bogart presents it, *temenos* represents a safe and protected space where “mental work can take place” (Jung cited by Bogart, 2021, p. 30). This space, of course, is individual. It seemed significant for the participants in our study that they felt trusted to do this kind of “work” with autonomy. As we understand, they were aware of how they could increasingly profit from the entangled opportunities offered by the drama space to (re)invent and (re)discover hidden and undeveloped resources and strengths.

Several participants told us that they had experienced overcoming mental hurdles and often self-sabotaging patterns in a safe and empowering way. Afterwards, they felt more competent and with new self-confidence and trust in themselves. They conveyed that this kind of training and repetition was essential for their learning processes and acquisition of the skills. Little by little, they felt that they gained competences to cope with problems and crises without too much emotional distress. The serious immersion in the art form seemed to provide the necessary holding space for each individual when they chose to address their subjective mental health related meaning making processes. We understood that the students’ intra-actions with the many layers of the entangled drama space were prompted equally from without and within. Their learning experience in the drama space seemed to include learning to increasingly trust the embodied space within – as an inner companion and *temenos*. Guided by this inner “voice” they revealed awareness of their own ability to search for exploring and practicing strategies that give a sense of satisfaction and by which they feel they expand their repertoire of life skills and emotional coping strategies. As we see it, this resonates with the salutogenic model of health as a continual meaning-making process (Eriksson, 2017). Further, the initial notion of the drama space as *home* and *belonging* may be understood to represent the participants’ inner *temenos* as a deeply felt drive and common resource for making sense of life experience.

Summing up

To sum up, our findings demonstrate that the intra-active dance between the drama space and the participants represents complex processes of sense making, including making sense of mental health experience. With the complex-sensitive lens of agential realism, we have explored how the participants perceived the drama space as an inviting and actively co-creating companion for entangled meaning making, transgressing the formal educational aims of the curriculum. By this, the findings demonstrate that the educational context offered a mental health related by-product supporting the participants’ sense of self and inner resources for well-being. We have seen that working seriously from *within* the art form offers potential for the individual to explore and challenge their known and not-yet-known behaviour, feelings and choices. For those who commit meaningfully, the learning in the drama space thus seems to provide possibility to develop competences and skills to respond to life’s challenges beyond the drama stage to the regular life stage.

For future research, we believe that it would be relevant look at how our findings can be implemented into appropriate pedagogical strategies. In this way, we see the course we held in 2018 for around 50 drama teachers in Norway not only as a stepping-stone for this study but also for future conversations and explorations. Ideally, the best prospect for the drama students’ holistic learning processes and mental health related self-discoveries seems to happen when they build on and continuously integrate their experiential learning processes to their personal lives. When they feel their autonomy respected, this seems to enhance

their innate ability to awaken their own resources and sense of coherence to balance and negotiate the various entanglements of the drama space, unfolding and intra-acting simultaneously as ripples in the water.

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