AOSIS

Drama for learning in the classroom

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Background: This study addresses how the modality of classroom drama and playwriting accentuated future teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and their knowledge about developmental psychology for teachers. The study was framed in a bifocal model of PCK and a signature pedagogy, with the intersection of learning and acting in a play as an important component of the framework, which includes the knowledge of what the Vygotskian concept of a 'zone of proximal development (ZPD)' comprises. The study includes discussions about drama as an educative medium, specifically 'drama for learning in the classroom'.

Aim: The research aimed to explore how the pedagogical power of classroom drama can diversify primary student teachers' repertoire of pedagogical tools.

Setting: The study was conducted at an urban university in Gauteng. A total of $n = 90$ participants were purposefully selected to participate in the study.

Methods: The methodology followed in this research was qualitative, and it employed a case study design in which the researcher investigated her practice as a practitioner-researcher. She investigated the students' classroom drama artefacts and conducted focus group interviews with participating students about their experiences during the playwriting course.

Results: The findings revealed that students' engagement in the playwriting activity highlighted that they had moved from basic beginner authors to completing pedagogic plays that are usable in primary school classrooms. With that, they had reached 'higher mental functions' in their 'ZPD'.

Conclusion: Using classroom drama as a pedagogy was beneficial for teaching vocabulary in Sesotho and isiZulu.

Contribution: The study has also contributed to the field through the playwriting model with suggestions for several applications of classroom playwriting and performance.

Keywords: classroom drama; playwriting; practitioner research; signature pedagogy; zone of proximal development.

Introduction

Children's theatre as an adaptive model for classroom drama

This article will discuss how pre-service teachers can learn how to 'make' classroom drama by capturing dramatic scenarios in their play scripts as part of their pedagogic toolkit. From a different viewpoint, Omasta and Snyder-Young (2014) acknowledge that the field of educational drama has:

> [S]elf-imposed research paradigms and create comfort zones that encourage certain types of research while creating conspicuous gaps and silences by limiting the modes of inquiry we employ and regulating what data we report. (p. 7)

In an overview of 400 publications in English they conclude the lack of diverse geographical regions represented in the publications and they express concern about the 'self-imposed paradigms' which encourage certain types of research and leaving gaps as well (Omasta & Snyder-Young 2014). Another author, van de Water (2021), argues that drama in education is necessary. She proposes the use of drama in 'alternative' theories of teaching and learning based on recent neuroscientific research and lays out an integrative approach to teaching and learning that promotes inclusion, diversity and social awareness, through embodied and contextualised learning.

The history of drama in education (in the UK) has been captured extensively by authors such as Heathcote and Bolton (1995), Heathcote and Herbert (1985), Bolton (1985), Slade (1995) and O'Toole (2009). Much of their work has laid the foundation of what is generally regarded

as drama in education or 'process drama', which is about the use of dramatic play in education. Another common term is 'educational drama', which often encompasses playwriting and theatrical aspects of drama that find expression in performance (Gray, Pascoe & Wright 2018; Pascoe 2014). In the UK, Slade (1995) is regarded as a pioneer in this field, and his book *Child Drama* and the Rea Street Centre, where he worked in Birmingham, is well known. Although there are some studies about drama in the general sense and children's theatre in South Africa, there is little to no research about these methods as pedagogical tools for teaching Higher Education institutions that train pre-service teachers, a unique gap that this study addresses. In this study, I introduced students to an aspect of drama, which was playwriting. Playwriting is the art of writing plays for theatrical performance (Gardiner 2019). For them to be able to use classroom performance and scriptwriting as a pedagogical approach, teachers need to know how to write plays that align with the typical structure of a play for classroom performance.

There are elements of children's dramatic play that can be useful for planning classroom performance. Children's theatre has been researched by several scholars (Maguire 2021; Maguire & Schuitema 2013; Schonmann 2006), and the definition of the term varies. It is widely regarded as a performing art form, with an audience of children who participate in the dramatic performance as audience members (Fritz 2015; Rosenberg & Predergast 1983). Professional children's theatre differs from school productions such as the one studied by Henning, Fritz and Swarts (2009), in which the play focuses on a school community's concern about fairness and social justice. Some children's theatre conventions have developed to enhance audience engagement and direct participation. The creative process for adult and children's theatre differs in several ways (Aram & Mor 2009). For example, in children's theatre, a 'melodramatic' acting style is intended to optimise the audience's engagement and focus. Emotions, actions, movements and storylines are exaggerated, and the acting has fewer subtleties and nuances. This approach to stage direction is important for some proponents of children's theatre. I do not agree with this stereotype and would argue for *authentic drama for children* with an aesthetic, naturalistic portrayal of characters. Goldberg (1974) asserts that the aesthetic merits and the level of professionalism in children's theatre are the same as in adult theatre. This means that the merits on which a play is assessed are the same. For children, I would argue that sincerity in character portrayal is important, and farcical characterisation should preferably be avoided because it tends to portray stereotypes. Other terms used to describe children's theatre include *theatre with children*, *theatre by children* and *theatre for children* (Eluyefa 2017). This does not exclude an audience of adults, as they may be accompanying children and may also be interested in watching the performance.

The first staged children's theatre productions began in the late nineteenth century in Europe and took the form of 'touring companies with a dramatisation of folk and fairy tales' (Bennett 2005:12; Eluyefa 2017). These touring companies performed plays as street plays with props and they included music and dance. The first widely recognised children's play in English was *Peter Pan*, which was written by the Scottish playwright and novelist Sir James Matthew in 1904, and *Toad of Toad Hall*, written by Alan Milne in 1929. 'In the United Kingdom, there was a surge in the formation of several children's theatre companies shortly after the Second World War, including John Allen's Glyndebourne Children's Theatre, John English's Midland Arts Centre in Birmingham, and George Devine's Young Vic Players' (Wood & Grant 1997:9). During this time, writers began to write increasingly for a specific child-based audience, and the plays were performed on theatre stages, typically, the adult performed a character. Other dramatic elements of children's theatre include the use of music, dance, lighting, and stage props (Bennett 2005).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this article consists of two models. Firstly, I utilise Shulman's model of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman 1986, 1987), coupled with his model of a 'signature pedagogy' for theorising teaching of a specific learning area (Shulman 2005; Shulman & Shulman 2004). Secondly, with PCK he proposed that teaching requires specialised knowledge of various types, including subject content, instructional or teaching methods and knowledge of learners. Because he introduced this framework, it has become widely used in educational research and practice, including in teacher education. Lastly, in his subsequent work, Shulman and Shulman (2004) and Shulman (2005:52) introduced the notion of 'signature pedagogies' as the 'ways in which future practitioners are educated to think, perform, and act with integrity in their new professions in the same way professionals in their field would'. He noticed that institutions where future professionals are educated and trained are the 'nurseries' of the profession (Kortjass & Mbatha 2021). This way, pre-service teachers learn about playwriting as a specific discipline. In my study, there have been some indications of a signature pedagogy for playwriting (Gardiner 2017; Gardiner & Anderson 2018). As a component of such a 'signature', I propose that pre-service teachers should know theories of the developmental psychology of play (including play-acting). In this study, I specifically foreground the view of Vygotsky (1978), who introduced his view of children's play in a multidimensional way. He proposed that play comprises art performance, self-expression, imagination and role-play.

Vygotsky's view of the role of play in child development

By framing the study with the notion of a PCK 'signature pedagogy' (Shulman 2005), I include knowledge of play as an important developmental component of childhood learning

and development. Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory posited that semiotic mediation serves as a gateway to cultural knowledge. He argued that children's natural play comprises sociocultural knowledge and concept formation, thus a tool for cognitive development (Vygotsky 1986). By including a sociocultural (and cultural-historical) view of children's play, the 'content' component of PCK is extended: Not only should teachers know the methods and tools of playwriting and classroom play production but they also need knowledge of general child development and specifically, what constitutes children's play and play-acting in learning (Hedegaard 2012). I adopted a Vygotskian view in this study and show how his work in drama contributed to his psychology practice.

Pre-service teachers as playwrights for pedagogy

Although the terms 'drama' and 'theatre' may not be interchangeable, they are closely connected through the script of a play. In terms of the given quotation, I would argue that classroom plays comprise both, drama refers to the playwriting process and the product, as well as the rehearsal and practice aspects, leading up to the classroom performance. In this study, only the initial phase of the process, playwriting, has been included.

Despite different views and types, 'drama in education' as a generic term refers to a variety of modalities or 'pedagogical genres' (Andersen 2004). Various terms are referred to in the literature, such as developmental drama, creative dramatics, educational drama (Ward 1930), the mantle of the expert (Bolton 1985; Heathcote & Herbert 1985), informal drama (Wagner 1998) and process drama (O'Neill 1995). All these terms describe the use of drama techniques in the classroom. Some of these may be used to stimulate creative writing or as a dramatisation of learning content with a specific script (Henning 1991). This usually unfolds when a teacher scaffolds learners' roles within an imagined context (Heathcote & Bolton 1995) but is also achieved by teaching content (Henning 1981) with a definitive script and not through improvisation or guided role-play.

Advocates for drama as a pedagogical tool propose that it enables learners to merge their imagination with learning content and, importantly, take on the role of a 'character' in guided role-play (Andersen 2004; Idogho 2016; Mages 2018). Such 'play acting' would be facilitated by the teacher, who builds on the actions and reactions of the learners while they are acting in a particular role. This process differs from classroom theatre because theatre requires scripted dialogue that is performed on a 'stage' for an 'audience' (Gray et al. 2018; Pascoe 2014). A study by Michaelides and Loizou (2024) showed that early childhood educators must have two important sociodramatic and imaginative play skills to teach the young children in their care, namely, (1) acting in a role and (2) interactive dialogue. This type of role-play, which includes simulation and some improvisation, is often utilised in early childhood development (ECD) settings to aid the development of children through listening to one another

and responding in turn (Bruner, Jolly & Sylva 2017; Lunga, Esterhuizen & Koen 2022; Ndabezitha 2023).

Such interactive dialogue and acting are useful mechanisms for teaching vocabulary (Alber & Foil 2003; Bezuidenhout 2021; Smith 2006). It provides learners with the opportunity to have some preparation for a specific character that they perform. They also get acquainted with the topics of the interactive dialogue in which they communicate with the other characters (Baruch 2006; Bodrova 2008; Brater 1989; Dunn & O'Toole 2009). During this type of dramatisation, children can be guided by a teacher or a more experienced adult, who does not influence what they say but rather guides the dramatic activity (Alshraideh & Alahmadi 2020). Sometimes this dramatisation can be converted into subsequent plays for classroom production (Dawson & Lee 2018). Lobman, Clark and Ryan (2015), in a discussion about drama in the early grades, refer to Jones and Reynolds (1992), where the authors question the assumption that children's dramatic play is most valuable when it is largely free of adult influence. The authors articulate this shift in their book, *The Play's the Thing: Teacher's Roles in Children's Play* (1992). Lobman et al. (2015) describe the advancement of drama, from the 'dress-up corner to drama activities' for learning in the classroom.

It is against this background that I undertook my study. My viewpoint is that teachers can be educators, directors and playwrights at the same time – and fulfil the role of 'didaskalos'. They can author or co-author a play that has all the qualities of an authentic script as well as an authentic production, although the objective is pedagogical. While learning to write (and read) scripts, pre-service teachers have an opportunity to advance their literacy skills and their language teaching tools across the curriculum. Authors such as Aram and Mor (2009), Baldwin and Fleming (2003), Baker-Sennet, Matusov and Rogoff (1992) and Brown (2007) propose scripted drama activities as a powerful means of language education. They propose that classroom play engages children in a process in which they not only acquire vocabulary but also provide an opportunity to use oral language with such vocabulary (Baldwin & Fleming 2003; Pascoe 2014; Wolf 1992).

Added to that, I argue that classroom plays also create an opportunity for children to master and develop early academic language in a way that makes language acquisition contextually relevant because they are learning *in* a role as a character. Shingenge (2024) advises that academic language should be introduced in the early grades with a move beyond solely narrative discourse. In addition to oral language development, learners also read and write when they write mini-plays as part of the creative writing curriculum, or as plays about subject content. When preparing for a classroom performance, learners not only read aloud for content but also with intonation, pauses and accentuation, which express meaning prosodically. I would argue that the use of

classroom plays as pedagogical tools can help children not only practice the cognitive skills of reading and writing but also develop targeted vocabulary.

To take on the role of a 'didaskalos', (student), teachers must know and demonstrate knowledge of the playwriting process. During this process, they practice some new skills, such as the composition of dialogue and scene setting (Gardiner 2019; Worthman 2002). Creative playwriting skills are developed through the understanding of the process and scope of knowledge required for creating plays with specific themes and characters (Üstündağ 1997). I agree with the view that playwriting skills can be taught, not only to adults but also to primary school learners (Gardiner & Anderson 2018). Therefore, it is important to approach the playwriting process with tried and tested methods. One of these approaches is the 'student playwright model', which Gardiner (2019) proposes for novice playwrights. As the focus of this study is on the development of (student) teachers as playwrights who will use drama texts as pedagogical tools, I agree with this model. He proposed a model to represent the process of writing a play, which my students also followed (Figure 1).

Research methods and design

The study employed qualitative data collection methods including semi-structured focus group interviews and document analysis (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2004; Merriam 1998). A detailed analysis of the interview data is published in Khasu and Henning (2024).

This article reports on the deductive analysis of classroom plays according to pedagogical, as well as dramaturgical criteria for classroom plays (Flick 2022). Final year BEd pre-service teachers in the foundation and intermediate phase programmes participated in the study. The data were gathered over 2 years, with the first set of data gathered from August 2020 to October 2020. The second set of data was gathered from August 2021 to October 2021. The data collection was structured in this way to allow pre-service teachers 6 months to learn about pedagogical playwriting.

The population from which the sample was selected consisted of members of intact groups of students (N = 445). The sample (*n* = 90), including 11 male students and 79 female students was selected to include students who were conversant in Sesotho or isiZulu. Participants were selected with a specific purpose in mind, utilising what is generally referred to as 'purposeful sampling' (Corbin & Strauss 2007; Creswell 2003; Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2007; Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1998; Yin 2003, 2018).

Analysis of the classroom plays

A deductive approach was employed to analyse the data from the classroom plays (Hyde 2005). I began the data analysis process by considering the titles of the plays and assessing the pedagogical value in the content of each play according to a set of criteria in a rubric that I designed. The design of the rubric was informed by the literature on playwriting (Gardiner 2017, 2019; Gardiner & Anderson 2018). The rubric was utilised to assign scores based on the overall merit of each play. Figure 2 sets out the main components of this rubric.

Performability of the plays and characterisation

The performability of a play is dependent on how well it can be performed to appeal optimally to the audience; it must also provide an engaging theatrical experience for children (Eluyefa 2017; Maguire & Schuitema 2013; Wood & Grant 1997). The students wrote plays with performance aspects that would appeal to children in an enriching and engaging way. Characters in the play are important for the development of the plot and are identifiable for child actors (Gardiner & Anderson 2018). Each character must be distinct from others to create an interesting story with powerful dialogue and opportunities for dialogue and action that can mirror 'dramatical collisions', as described by Vygotsky (Veresov 2004, 2017). How we read a drama text includes reading with expression or feeling (Chaiklin 2003; Chizhik 2009). At firstly, secondly and thirdly implementing the rules of playwriting, 'imitating' and 'mimicking', then, as they progressed, I noticed that the plots were 'thickening' as they went along and that the students were using the colloquial power of an African language to show how they were aspiring to 'higher mental functions'. The authentic, creative dialogue shows that they had discussed (and debated) the topics, the characters and the storyline (Brown 2017). Children should be encouraged to do the same and use movements or

Source: Gardiner, P., 2019, Teaching playwriting: Creativity in practice, Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, p. 62

FIGURE 1: The student playwright model.

Analysing the pedagogical value of the classroom plays				
The performability of the plays	Authentic characters	Imaginative plot	A play-rich drama text	The sesotho or isiZulu AI-related vocabulary

FIGURE 2: A summary of the pedagogical playwriting rubric (20% for each criterion).

gestures to express the emotion described in the character dialogue of the text. For children to demonstrate this, teachers and pre-service teachers must be trained on how to apply widely used drama techniques, especially considering that these techniques can help introduce children to the performance aspect of drama.

To illustrate this idea, I draw from some extracts of the students' plays. The play '*Ubuhlakani obenziwe esikhathini samanje*' [The era of artificial intelligence] (Box 1) explores the story of a poor young girl who lives in a rural area. She is introduced to AI at school and thrives in this new environment. She learns the importance of technology and how it can improve our lives. An extract shows the central

BOX 1: Scene from '*Ubuhlakani obenziwe esikhathini samanje*'.

Play	: *Ubuhlakani obenziwe esikhathini samanje* (isiZulu play)
Scene	: 6
Setting	: Mr Zikode is teaching in the classroom
Page	: 31

Mr Zikode:

Sanibonani bafundi. Niyakhumbula ekilasini lethu eledlule sikhulume ngokuthi ama Robots angasisiza kanjani esikoleni?

Gugulethu:

Mr Zikode sithe Irobhothi ekilasini lenza izingane kanye nabafundi abasebancane abanezidingo ezikhethelie ukuthi bakhe isipiliyoni sabo sokufunda esiyingqayizivele ngokubanikeza ukufinyelela okwenziwe ngezifiso kulwazi nangezinto zokufundisa. Amarobhothi angahlelwa ukuhlangabezana nezidingo zomuntu ngamunye.

Mr Zikode:

Good morning learners. Do you remember that in the previous lesson, we discussed how robots can help us at school?

Gugulethu:

Mr Zikode, we said that robots help children and learners with special needs to develop and learn uniquely. So that they can reach their dreams and gain knowledge. Robots can be designed to help meet their individual needs.

BOX 2: Scene from '*Ubuhlakani obenziwe*'.

Play	: *Ubuhlakani obenziwe* (isiZulu play)
Scene	: 7
Setting	: On the school playground
Page	: 37–38

GULUVA 1

Manje usenza amabhari angithi isikole senu sihanjelwa abantu base Or'kanti abelungu bangale pheshya noLing'ling bezonidizela ngama-Phone. Ebhari khipha lephone mungafuni ukufa, ufela ifoni okungesiyo eyakho.

[Ayikhiphe uSibonelo i-phone ebanika ethukile]

GULUVA 1

Manje, wena zikhiphani ngawe? Ufuna ukuyikhipha sesikuhlobise ngegazi?

[Ebuka uMshumayeli ngamehlo athusayo]

MSHUMAYELI

Nansi.

[Ekhipha ifoni]

GULUVA 2

Yini ke manje le? Mara yani manje le? Doti wani lo manje? Aaaah boy boy wadlala ngathi sifuna lena oyithole esikoleni? Ufuna size sizikhiphele thina?

GULUVA 1

You're making us fools. Your school gets visits from white people from overseas and they give you nice phones. Hey, you fool. Give me your phone if you don't want to die. Imagine dying for a phone that is not yours. [Sibonelo is trembling with fear. He takes out his phone and gives it to them].

GULUVA 1

What's wrong with you? Do you want me to take out your phone after I have decorated it with your blood? [He looks at Mshumayeli with scary eyes]

MSHUMAYELI

Here it is

[He takes out the phone]

GULUVA 2

What is this? What brand is this? What nonsense is this? Sighs. You're playing tricks on us. We want the phone you got at school. Do you want us to take it out from you?

theme in the play about how technology and AI can be useful in helping learners with disabilities and special needs.

The theme of good versus 'evil' is an inherent theme of plays intended for children, often with a moral message (Eluyefa 2017). Although the focus of this practitioner research was on creating a play that had AI vocabulary, it did not mean that the vocabulary would be the overarching criterion. The notion of good triumphing over 'evil' or good versus 'bad' is an important aspect of children's theatre and it addresses the fear of AI taking over our lives. Much of the students' plays had some examples of this theme in the character dialogue.

In the play *Ubuhlakani obenziwe* [*artificial intelligence*] (Box 2), there is an example of this theme. In the scene, the main character, Mshumayeli, and one of his friends, Sibonelo, are robbed of their cellphones that were meant to help them learn about artificial intelligence; they survive the incident. The bullies pick on them because the main character is in the process of discovering his gender orientation. Thus, he seems to be an easy target for bullies. In this scene, two supporting characters, '*Guluva* 1' and '*Guluva* 2', are introduced in the play as bullies who embody the typical bully language and actions. The names of the bullies are also cleverly used in the play, as they are names that are commonly used for people who associate themselves with crime. The moral in this part of the story is about the importance of making choices that will preserve your life, even if it means losing your possessions, which can always be replaced. The following scene is an example of how *Mshumayeli* and *Sibonelo* face 'evil' and survive the bullying incident because the bullies did not know about the latest cellphone technology.

Play-rich and imaginative plays

A 'play-rich' classroom play integrates elements of playful learning with the tenets of traditional children's theatre (Khasu & Henning 2024). In such plays, imagination is encouraged by representing something in a way that has not yet been perceived previously in the classroom, and which creates 'dramatical collisions' of some sort. Some of the plays in this study lacked a sufficiently play-rich and imaginative plot. Some parts of the plays might have represented aspects of reality in a way that children may not yet have experienced. In the play *Na o motho*? (Box 3) this is demonstrated in how the robot, Anny, can 'feel' or show empathy towards the other characters.

The artificial intelligence-related vocabulary

The students were able to integrate some AI-related vocabulary into their plays. Much of their vocabulary translation entailed interpreting the 'description' of the word to create the terminology in isiZulu. For example, one group succeeded in using more terminology in their play because the creativity in their storyline allowed them to experiment with a range of AI-

related terminology. In the Sesotho plays, the pre-service teachers could integrate some of the AI vocabulary into Sesotho. One group attempted to integrate more terminologies into their play because most of the group members were Sesotho home language speakers. Figure 3, Figure 4 and Figure 5 show the number of AI-related vocabulary that the students could integrate into the classroom plays in isiZulu and Sesotho. These were AI-related terminologies that the students could version into either Sesotho or isiZulu.

It is important to show that the AI-related vocabulary was introduced in conversational dialogue and not in silo (Ntshangase-Mtolo 2009). The play, 'Buchwepheshe uligeja elilingene abalimi', (Box 4) explores how children are introduced to AI by a robot that looks like a human. It also explores how technology is useful in solving medical problems and improving the lives of people. This play was designed for learners in Grades 4–6 with age-appropriate language use. The play has rich examples of figurative language, such as the use of isiZulu idioms and proverbs, which is also expressed in the title of the play. In the extract from the play, about two neighbours, Hlelo convinces Sihle to agree to have prosthetic legs to make her life easier. They share their experiences of technology in their work environment.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the ethics and higher degrees committee in the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg (ethics number: Sem 2-2020-118). Informed consent was requested and obtained from the participants who took part in this research. As a practitioner-researcher, I designed a course to teach students about playwriting as a pedagogical tool. It was important to ensure that the authors' dual role as both the researcher and their lecturer did not negatively influence the students and the research process.

BOX 3: Scene from 'Na o motho?', Robot with emotions.

Play	: Na o motho? (Sesotho play)
Scene	: 2
Setting	: In the morning at school.
Page	: 9–10

Thuto:

Se ke fihlile jwale, ho bolelang hore le tlameha ho tsamaya mona.

Roboto-Anny:

Tjhe, ha ba tlameha hore ba suthe. Re ka qoqa kaofela jwale ka ha re qadile.

Thuto:

Tjhe! Ha ke batle bashanyana bana ba ditshila pela ka ebile ha ke batle ho bua le bona.

Roboto-Anny:

Empa se o se etsang ha sa loka, ha wa tlameha hore o ba leleke le ho ba bitsa ka mabitso ao. Re ka thaba kaofela ntle le ho lwana.

Thuto:

I'm here now, that means you must all go away.

Robot-Anny:

No, they are not supposed to leave. We can all talk together like you found us doing.

Thuto:

No! I don't want these dirty boys next to me. I don't even want to talk to them.

Robot-Anny:

But what you are doing is not right! You are not supposed to shout at them like that and call them such names. We can all be happy without fighting.

Results

It is evident from the data analysis on various levels that the pre-service teachers were having rich learning experiences (Fernandez & Kullu 2019). They had entered the zone of proximal development by learning from their interactions with the lecturer to reach a higher mental function (Kozulin 2003) of ultimately making theatre tools for teaching AI terminology in isiZulu and Sesotho. For this, they interacted with peers with varying levels of knowledge, and with the lecturer who scaffolded their learning from a position of knowledge – a leading 'knowledgeable other' (Veresov 2017). At the same time, they addressed a crucial current topic in the world,
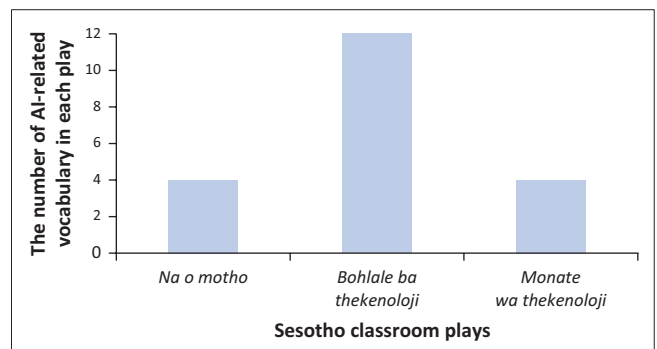

FIGURE 3: Artificial intelligence-related vocabulary in the Sesotho plays.
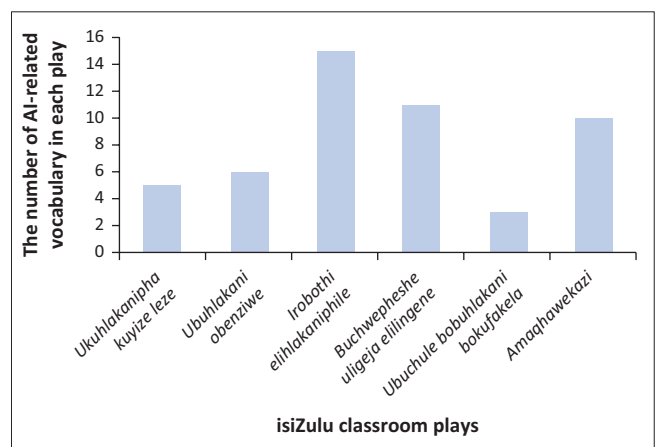

FIGURE 4: Artificial intelligence-related vocabulary in the isiZulu plays.
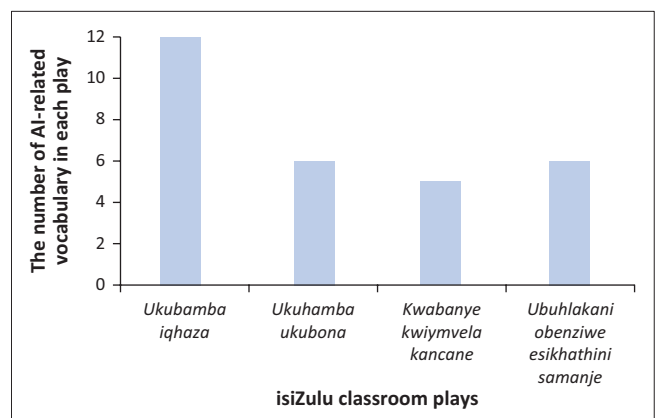

FIGURE 5: Artificial intelligence-related vocabulary in the isiZulu plays.

namely, AI and its increasing role in the world. It was evident in the style and content of the plays that the pre-service teachers had engaged not only with the 'rules' of classroom playwriting but also with some of the concerns they have about AI and technology in general (Figure 6).

Upon reading the final versions of the students' plays and considering their assessment, it was evident that they had entered a 'zone of proximal development (ZPD) of playwriting about AI' for primary school learners (Kozulin 2003). The findings also showed that playwriting can be a 'signature pedagogy' – which is about a specific activity that is useful for the explicit teaching of vocabulary by using a creative text. In this study, the content was about the introduction of AI-related vocabulary into conversational discourse (Khasu 2025).

Playwriting and classroom theatre could serve as pedagogical tools that help pre-service teachers and experienced teachers teach other topics in the curriculum in a conversational way that appeals to children. Additionally, it is an approach that can be effective for teaching sensitive topics in the curriculum i.e., abuse in a way that is not too explicit to children. In psychology, drama techniques have proven to be helpful when treating children who have experienced trauma (Magee 2024; Perry 2014). By using this approach, teachers might be able to see how children develop in their zone of proximal development. When they first encounter a new topic, they may experience some discomfort and may need to repeat the dialogue several times. The more they practice their dialogue in this role and interact with the more knowledgeable others, an increased level of understanding is brought about and they reach higher levels zone of

proximal development – where they now know more and have gained a deeper conceptual understanding of the task (Gupta 2009; Veresov & Fleer 2016).

Children should be encouraged to show expression or feelings when performing a character in a role (Gardiner & Anderson 2018) (Figure 7). In addition, they should be encouraged to do the same and use movements or gestures to express the emotion described in the character dialogue of the text. For children to be able to demonstrate this, teachers and pre-service teachers must be trained on how to apply widely used drama techniques, especially considering that these techniques can help to introduce children to the performance aspect of drama. This article showed that scaffolding how pre-service teachers write the plays as pedagogical tools for classroom theatre performance can influence their beliefs, attitudes and implicit knowledge about classroom drama and performance as a pedagogy.

Conclusion

The student classroom play experience has given rise to what the study can contribute to the practice of teacher education and teacher professional development, as well as to scholarship and practitioner research methodology. The plays add to students' repertoire of teaching vocabulary in primary school across the curriculum. A signature pedagogy for classroom plays as a pedagogical approach in primary school can contribute to how pre-service teachers use scripted

BOX 4: Scene from '*Buchwepheshe uligeja elilingene abalimi*'.

Play	: *Buchwepheshe uligeja elilingene abalimi* (isiZulu play)
Scene	: 1
Setting	: Hlelo and Sihle are talking outside.
Page	: 9
Hlelo:	
Yehlisa amaphaphu mama, ngicabanga ukuthi nginalo iqhinga ongalisebenzisa ukuze uthole ukwelekeleleka okwanele kulesisimo okusona. Ngikhuluma nawe nje kulomsebenzi engiqashwe kuwo ezinyangeni ezimbili ezendlule, sisebenza ngobuchule bethekhinoloji ukwenza izinto zibe lula futhi zisheshe kufakwa wonke umuntu ezweni.	
Sihle:	
Qhubeka makhelwane ngisakuphile indlebe.	
Hlelo:	
Sikhanda imishini yokufundisa, amalobhothi asabantu, izitho zomzimba ezifakelwayo kanye nokunye okuningi. Okungiletha kulesimo sakho, kawudingile ukuphila ngokwenzelwa uma kukhona lobubuchule bezitho ongazithola usuxhunywe zona nawe ukuze phela ukwazi ukuphinde uzimele ngezakho.	
Hlelo:	
Calm down, I think I have an idea of how you can get help to solve the problem about your situation. In the job that I started a few months ago, we work with changing technology. Things become easier and quicker to do, and everyone is involved.	
Sihle:	
Carry on, I am still listening.	
Hlelo:	
We build machines that teach, robots that help people. We make artificial limbs that help people and many other things. I came here to tell you that you don't need to struggle when there is technology that can help you walk.	
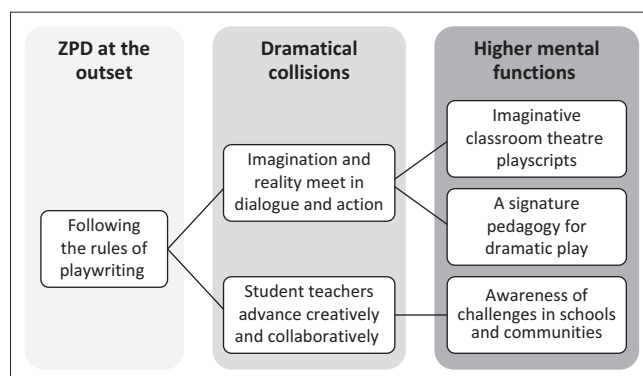
ZPD, zone of proximal development.

FIGURE 6: The zone of proximal development of student teachers' development/movement.
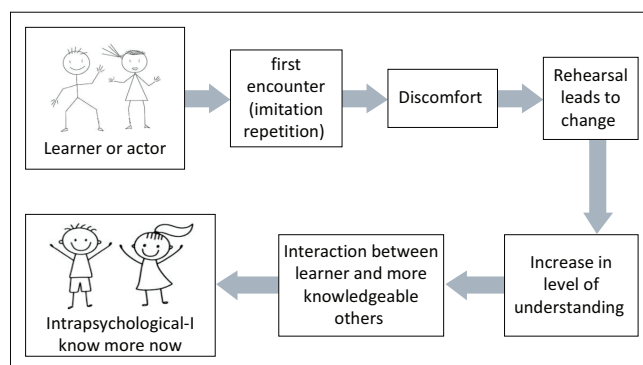
FIGURE 7: Learning to perform a role while developing a concept.

classroom plays to develop targeted vocabulary and enhance children's understanding of a text (Gray & Yang 2015). Drama texts are also important for helping pre-service teachers learn how to develop the learners' pragmatic knowledge of the text (Murphy 1997). It was also evident that the playwriting task itself was a valuable learning experience for the pre-service teachers because the learnings can be utilised in their professional teaching. The students learned from one another, expanded their vocabulary of AI, and developed a deeper understanding of this terminology in either Sesotho or isiZulu. They also increased their ability to work in virtual groups, guided by their online human mediator.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

M.N.K. is the sole author of this research article.

Funding information

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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