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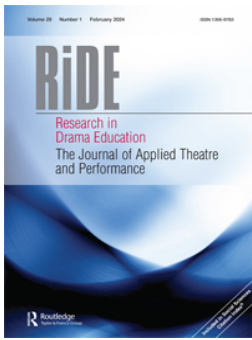
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Pedagogical sensitivity in successful drama educational reader's theatre – experiences of the teachers

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ABSTRACT

Reader's theatre is a well-used method and studied for practising oral reading. We examined teachers' experiences implementing our drama educational reader's theatre. We interviewed 12 Finnish teachers to find out what benefits teachers see in reader's theatre. The participants saw the approach as beneficial, not only considering reading but in various other areas as well. We also wanted to examine what kind of teacher actions lead to successful DERT. We found out that teachers' sensitivity on embodied level is essential, and the teacher should meet student needs carefully. Overall, implementing the programme seemed successful and beneficial for the students.

KEYWORDS

Readers theatre; drama education; embodied knowing; teacher sensitivity; pedagogical tact; teacher experiences; middle childhood

Introduction

Readers' theatre (RT) is a well-known method for practising reading fluency. The main aim of RT is to provide a fun and inspiring way of practising reading, where repetition comes naturally within the goal of rehearsing a performance for others. In our intervention programme we applied drama educational features, mixing repeated reading with process drama exercises (Bowell and Heap 2001, 87; Medina et al. 2021, 139; O'Neill 1995) and exercises aiming to prepare a theatrical performance for an audience. Instead of standing still and reading from their scripts – as is common in traditional RT (see e.g. McKay 2008), the students in our programme take on roles and rehearse the play as in a regular play, reading from scripts. However, fluent reading practice remains as the focus, as students read from scripts during the performance. Thus, we call our programme drama educational readers' theatre (DERT). Repeated reading is a well-researched, effective method for practising reading (Petersen-Brown et al. 2021). Previous research has shown that significant improvements in reading fluency and prosody can be achieved through RT (see e.g. Martinez, Roser, and Strecker 1998; Mastrothanas, Kladaki, and Andreou 2023; Millin and Rinehart 1999; Rinehart 1999; Young et al. 2019; Young and Rasinski 2009; Young and Rasinski 2018) and that it is a well-liked method among students (see e.g. Chard and Tyler 2000; Garrett and

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O'Connor 2010; Hautala, Ronimus, and Junttila 2022; Junttila, Ronimus, and Hautala 2021). Encouraged by the previous studies, we have applied RT within the Finnish school system to struggling readers aged 10–11. Drama is mentioned as a method for learning in Finland's national curriculum over 70 times (Finnish National Agency for Education 2023). However, the distribution of lesson hours in the Finnish curriculum is fixed – drama not being one of the subjects, it would be demanding to make space for daily Reader's theatre activity. The programmes in many previous studies have often focused on short daily practice (see e.g. Mastrothanasis, Kladaki, and Andreou 2023, 9; Young and Rasinski 2018, 480). Our approach requires longer working periods and a peaceful environment to foster active participation in drama. The outcomes of a controlled intervention study are presented in an earlier article demonstrating the programme's positive effects on oral reading speed and oral reading anxiety. According to the main findings of the intervention research DERT participant's reading fluency developed equally when comparing to peers receiving special education in reading fluency. Moreover, the DERT participants had higher engagement ratings and a temporary reduction in reading errors and oral reading anxiety than their peers (Hautala, Ronimus, and Junttila 2022). In the present study, we focus on teacher experiences of applying the programme for the first time and the teacher's role in perceived student accomplishment and achieving learning outcomes. To our knowledge, teacher experiences are a less researched area of RT, especially in the Finnish context, where DERT is a fairly new approach for reading practice. Kabilan and Kamarudin (2010) researched the student and teacher perceptions on student motivation and attitude towards English studies and how RT affected them both. While their research context is different from ours, the narratives of the teachers have similarities. In addition to teacher perceptions, our research focuses on teachers' actions and encounters and their role in the successful DERT.

With short scripts and short-cropped lines, traditional RT stresses reading fluency and ease. The aim of our programme is also to support reading comprehension, especially through immersion in fiction. Glenberg (2011) and Sadoski say that bodily involvement is lacking in reading action 'because of the absence of gestures, vocal prosody' (Sadoski 2018, 341). We claim that reading a drama text aloud incorporates bodily involvement and therefore enhances the embodied comprehension. Or, as Medina et al. (2021, 138) describe:

Drama practice can create ruptures for new forms of engagement with texts, new forms of participation in responding to texts and interacting in classrooms, new unpredictable critical understandings that go beyond the retelling of a story, and new identifications to emerge.

We argue that in addition to reading and understanding context, expressing emotions in role, and interacting with other characters is embodied. The student, while reading a dialogue aloud and in waiting one's turn, experiences a bodily connection both to the text and to the others participating in the reading action. In role-taking and expressing emotions the reader utilises bodily and facial expressions, intonations, and interaction with others. A reader must also interpret the meanings between the lines, as it is not enough to understand the verbatim dialogue. However, as embodied reading also helps understand the text, there is a two-way movement between reading and

understanding. Better reading creates better comprehension and better comprehension creates better reading.

This kind of oral reading is demanding but also engaging. One must be present and focused for the dialogue to come to life. When students read aloud in larger groups, taking turns sentence by sentence, it is easier to sit still and wait for one's turn, without noticing what others read. A teacher can always point at the sentence with which to continue when one's turn starts. When engaged in drama exercise or reading a dialogue in which one is committed to, reading aloud becomes a shared embodied learning experience.

When teaching revolves around something as sensitive as one's voice and body, and expression in drama exercises, enabling a safe learning environment is crucial. Students struggling in oral reading often fear losing their face in front of their classmates. Often, these students have low self-esteem in school context and lack confidence in academic achievements (McNulty 2003; Novita 2016). Aldrup, Klusmann, and Lüdtke (2020) remind us that teacher sensitivity is crucial in alleviating student anxiety. Our DERT aims to provide a safe and fun space to practise oral reading, to excel oneself in acting, expression, group work and improve self-esteem. Role-taking, together with sensitive and tactful encounters with the teacher, allows the student to learn safely by trial and error and succeed in a way which rarely happens in regular reading lessons and within a large group of students.

Besides the generally unpredictable nature of a drama lesson, the teacher must be able to create and foster a safe atmosphere in which it is easy to try and in which the students are both willing and enthusiastic to play and enjoy the activity. This also requires a dialogical approach and willingness to negotiate from the teacher (Dickinson and Neelands 2006, 36–38; Viirret 2018, 163–164). Tanaka (2015) uses Merleau-Ponty's theory of intercorporeality to describe the mind–body connection between individuals. Dialogism, intersubjectivity and intercorporeality are essential in a drama educational approach to teaching (Anttila 2003; Viirret 2018).

It is the teacher's task to sense the students' eagerness and ability to participate. This is not always uttered in words by the students but through bodily expressions (Van Manen 1991, 150). Thus, sensitivity and tact are even more essential. We believe that for learning to take place, a safe and motivating learning environment, which is created through this intercorporeal togetherness, is essential. We see intercorporeality as a component of pedagogical love. As Määttä and Uusiautti describe:

A teacher's pedagogical love manifests itself in the ability to view the school subject from the students' perspective, the ability to support them and foresee the critical learning junctions, and the desire to work on the tasks for the students' sake. – A student has to be understood and respected when he or she is weak, a nonconformist, or difficult – even when he or she does not meet the teacher's expectation. (Maatta and Uusiautti 2012, 33)

Tactful presence requires being for and with the students with one's every sense. For some students reading might be scary and for some the drama exercises. Therefore, creating as low a threshold as possible for student participation is important.

There is previous research about embodied language learning and reading as embodied action, and even about combining drama into these (see e.g. Edmiston and McKibben 2011; Medina et al. 2021). However, we found no research combining RT, drama

education, embodied knowing and teacher perspectives. Embodied knowing and holistic learning is the essence of art education (Anttila 2008). In art education, one's body is immersed in an action that creates new knowing (Doddington 2014). In embodied knowing and especially in drama education, learning occurs through experiencing the world or the phenomena currently at hand. Embodied knowing intertwines with social interaction, which is essential to acknowledge in teacher-student interaction (Chapman, 2002 as cited in Wales 2009, 265; Wales 2009, 275).

The totality of being with a group is always embodied (Anttila 2003). The philosopher Martin Buber sees education and interaction between the teacher and the student as embodied interaction. As Buber (1985, 3, 97) says, interaction is not necessarily verbal or even kinesic 'a shared silence can also be a dialogue'. Dialogue is also a mutual understanding of each other's presence. People turn and lean towards each other and communicate through gestures. This applies to communication between students, between teacher-student and between teacher-group interaction. We identified this kind of activity or lack thereof in the teachers' descriptions. This is further explored in the discussion.

In addition to a safe learning environment, the student's intrinsic motivation to learn is a critical factor in DERT. Deci and Ryan (2000) present their self-determination theory (SDT), in which the intrinsic motivation emerges when these three take place: (1) autonomy, (2) competence and (3) relatedness. These all are strongly present in a successful DERT lesson. Firstly, the students have ownership over what is created together. Their personal agency is acknowledged and nourished. Secondly, the script used is appropriately challenging and adaptable for readers with different skill levels. In DERT, differentiation of the reading tasks is effortless. The third factor, relatedness, is fundamental to any drama lesson. The work is destined to fail if the building of a foundation for group work is neglected or left halfway. Students' sense of belonging and relatedness is the first stage a drama teacher must create.

Much previous research has been done on teacher-student interaction and its impacts (see e.g. Doyle et al. 2022; Pennings and Hollenstein 2020) and about teachers' role in student achievement (Cipriano et al. 2019; Ding and Sherman 2006). Some publications present practical guidelines about the teacher's role in RT (Kristensen 2022; Rasinski, Stokes, and Young 2017; Rinehart 2001) According to Kulo, Odundo, and Kibui (2021), who studied teachers' experiences about RT teachers, found the students gaining in reading accuracy, comprehension, and confidence. As Khanlou et al. (2022) have gathered, research shows that RT is versatilely effective in empathy, motivation and several areas of reading skills. However, often studies are focused on student achievement or RT principles and implementation strategies. We provide new information, as we concentrate on elementary school teachers' experiences and elaborate on how teachers' actions affect both the student achievements and attitudes.

In drama education, different questions about classroom management, knowledge of group dynamics and the teacher's sensitivity and tact arise (Toivanen and Kaasinen 2013; Toivanen, Pyykkö, and Ruismäki 2011; Wales 2009). We want to focus on specific questions regarding teachers' roles in teaching reading through drama. We are interested in examining the usefulness of our research-based programme in Finnish daily school life when executed by teachers who may or may not have experience in using drama methods. Paige et al. (2021) note that the teacher and their choices on how to proceed in class always play an essential role in implementing research-based reading programmes in

schools. Our research questions are: (1) What kind of an approach do teachers find readers' theatre to be, and what benefits do the teachers see in DERT? (2) How does the teacher operate in the successful readers' theatre lessons? To examine these questions, we interviewed teachers ($n = 12$) who implemented our DERT programme with their students and conducted a qualitative content analysis of the interview data.

Methodology and data collection

The data was collected in Finland as a part of Niilo Mäki Institute's (NMI) ReadDrama research project (2018–2023) on DERT and its impact on struggling readers' oral reading fluency. Our original intervention study was a randomised controlled study (Hautala, Ronimus, and Junttila 2022). Thus, in this study we were eager to know how the programme developed for the intervention works when incorporated into the regular schoolwork and implemented by in-practice teachers instead of the research group members. The present research is a multi-case study (Priya 2021) about the teachers' experiences on DERT and its possible benefits. Improvement of the students' reading skills is not studied in this article.

Participant recruitment and the implementation programme

The participating teachers were invited through NMI newsletter and social media platforms, to participate in the implementation study as a part of their daily teaching. The teachers could choose the participants for DERT groups according to their own pedagogical expertise. The teachers were advised to choose the students according to two needs: (1) struggling readers who need more practice in reading fluency and/or (2) timid readers who need more encouragement in oral reading. Moreover, teachers were prompted to consider the group dynamics and who are on a similar enough level in reading to prevent great differences in reading level from hindering group work. No personal information was collected from the teachers or their students at this phase. Forty-one teachers across Finland signed up for the implementation programme. Six teachers had to either cancel their participation or quit during the programme. Reasons for cancellation were not asked, though some of them provided the information nevertheless. Schedules and Covid-19 restrictions seemed to be the main reasons for not participating.

Programme by Hautala, Ronimus, and Junttila (2022) was used in this study as well, although minor updates were made. Also, the teachers were more freely allowed to teach either one 90-minute or two 45-minute lessons per week, according to what best fit their schedules. Altogether, the programme still consisted of 18 45-minute lessons. The teachers had access to an online manual introducing the weekly programme and giving insights into drama pedagogical thinking. On the website, there was also a ~32-minute-long video lecture by the first author. It was highly recommended to watch the video before starting the programme. Also, a FAQ page was updated on the project website. Furthermore, the participating teachers were strongly encouraged to seek support from the first author by telephone or email. Some of the teachers asked for help, for example on how to adapt the exercises. One of the participants had more difficulties in the group dynamics and in motivating the students. With the help from the first author, they tried to manage the group and eventually decided to release two

unmotivated students from the group. Teachers filled in journal forms about each lesson held for the research group to ensure the fidelity of the programme. Though there was some variation in the lesson proceedings, we saw that the programme was followed closely enough.

The interviewed teachers taught one group except for one teacher, Irene (pseudonym), who taught four groups altogether. Four of the participants worked as classroom teachers, and eight of them as special education teachers. The teachers were all experienced teachers. Work experiences ranged from over five years ($n = 2$), to over ten years ($n = 6$) and over 20 years of experience ($n = 4$). Only two of the 12 teachers had completed studies in drama education, one of them both basic and subject studies (60 ects), the other basic studies (25 ects). They also had experience using drama during lessons. Seven participants had either used drama as a teaching method or had experience doing theatre as a recreation. Three of the participants had neither experience nor any drama studies.

The students participating in DERT had a large scale of variation. The students' ages ranged from 8 to 12 years old. Most of them were native Finnish speakers. Two of the groups consisted only of Finnish as a second language speakers. These students had sufficient skills in Finnish to participate in the programme. All the students participating were struggling readers who needed additional practice with oral reading fluency or courage to read aloud in front of others. The information about the amount of learning support was collected. The teachers reported whether the students received general support ($n = 20$), intensified support ($n = 27$) or special support ($n = 17$). Two teachers had not provided information about the five students' support level. Other details about the students' difficulties, such as learning or behavioural disorders, were not collected.

The interviews

The teachers participating in this implementation phase were all invited via email to participate in an individual semi-structured interview (Glesne 2010, 102) about their experiences executing the DERT programme (see Appendix). They all signed an informed consent for the interview. The invitation stressed that all experiences are welcomed, no matter how they felt the programme had succeeded. The only requirement was that the programme was to be executed in its entirety. The interview data was collected days or weeks after each teacher had completed the DERT programme during the spring of 2021. The participants were allowed to participate in the interview by telephone call or a Microsoft Teams video call meeting. Everyone chose to participate through video call. It was possible to form a warm and easy-going atmosphere with the addition of non-verbal communication. The interviews lasted from 42 to 85 min.

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed for the data analysis phase. The transcripts totalled 159 pages of single-spaced text with a font size 12. During the interview, the interviewees were asked to freely talk about the experience, followed by detailed questions about the DERT programme, the students, and how the teachers saw the students' participation and learning processes were presented. The interviews were voluntary, and the anonymity of the interviewees was guaranteed by using codes.

The participants were allowed to intercept the interview any time they wished and were encouraged to skip questions they did not feel comfortable answering. However, all the interviewees seemed comfortable during the interviews. If they had nothing to add to the interviewer's additional questions, they rather frankly expressed it. The first author conducted the interviews, who also mentored and supported the teachers during the programme.

Analyses

We analysed the data using inductive qualitative content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 83–84). Especially concerning the first research question we used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). We wanted to focus on the teachers' experience with the DERT programme (Smith and Nizza 2022, 7). In handling the second research question, we applied pedagogical and embodied learning theories to what we interpreted from the interview data. We used ATLAS.ti software to help organise the data (Friese 2012). The respondents' mentions were handled as units of analysis. They were individual wordings or longer passages of description. The first author was responsible for coding and thematising the data. The categories emerged from the data; any pre-existing framework was not used.

Eventually, the codes belonged to ~50 subthemes. The mentions concerning their experiences and the DERT benefits were divided under 6 main themes (Table 1). For example, Paula (pseudonym) said: 'they got reinforcement, like this is going well and we improve in reading'. We categorised this into 'Student Experience in Attainment/accomplishment', which again is a subtheme under 'Joy of Accomplishment and increase in courage'. The teachers' encouraging actions and encounters with the students were divided into codes with three main themes (Table 2). Moreover, the teachers' discouraging actions and attributions of failure were divided into codes with four main themes (Table 3). As the data are remarkably rich, and the codes are manually gathered from the stream of narrative by the respondents, some of the excerpts may contain several of the subcategories. The first and the second authors discussed this categorisation process together. The first author translated the transcript excerpts. The respondents were given Finnish first names as pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Results

Generally, participation in the implementation was seen as successful. All ($n = 12$) the participants thought they might use the programme again, and by the time of the interview, some of them had already started the programme with new groups. The teachers saw several advantages in implementing the DERT programme. Also, the respondents who reported facing challenges during the implementation of the programme, saw the programme itself as beneficial and worth using: 'I'd like to try this programme again. Now that I know what is coming, it could work out even better' (Maria).

Table 1. Teachers' views about DERT's benefits.

Themes and subthemes	Mentions	Example quotes
Joy/enjoyment		
Generally enjoyable activity	36	'The students were every time so excited, and during the last time they asked: "what, this doesn't continue anymore!"' (Laura)
Enjoying drama and acting	25	
Fun for teacher	5	
Enjoying the story	3	
Joking, having fun	3	
Total	72	
Reading skills		
Fluency	23	'Expressive reading kind of increases understanding.' (Irene)
Expressive reading	9	
Courage to read	8	
Attitude towards reading	7	
Reading comprehension	6	
Awareness about one's own reading or following the text	3	
Language awareness	2	
Total	58	
Motivation		
Students reading without noticing they are reading	26	'I noticed that it [the playscript] inspired the students to read it over and again.' (Minna)
Reading motivation	14	
Motivation to perform/act	5	
Learning motivation	3	
Motivation towards the programme or participation	5	
Total	52	
Changes in perception of self and others		
Self-confidence and belief in oneself	28	'[Programme] strengthened self-esteem and image of self as a reader.' (Laura)
Perception of self	19	
Changes in how others see you	16	
'Beginning to bloom'	15	
Total	48	
Joy of accomplishment and increase in courage		
Student experience in attainment/accomplishment	19	'I think that the courage to perform was one of the biggest things.' (Irene)
Increase in performing courage	17	
Joy of performing/acting	2	
Total	38	
Growth in other skills		
Group work skills, social and interaction skills	12	'They saw themselves as a group with common function and common goal, and to me that is a great value.' (Paula)
Attention and executive functions	5	
Acting and embodied expression	4	
Total	21	

Q1: teacher perceptions about benefits of DERT

Our first research question is two-part: (1) What kind of an approach do teachers find readers' theatre to be, and what benefits do the teachers see in DERT? To gain insight into the teachers' views, we first searched for all the descriptions of the programme's benefits and advantages. These descriptions were categorised into six themes and 27 sub-themes, as presented in Table 1. The themes are presented in the order of frequency of mentions. As it shows, the most common mention was of general delight in participating in DERT. Reading skills were mentioned second most-often. They also saw delight and rousing of intrinsic motivation in their students. The remaining thematisations concern e.g. skill development. The table is accompanied with short transcript excerpts illustrating each main theme.

The benefits and advantages the teachers mentioned were numerous and elaborate. Teachers spoke with enthusiasm about their good experiences of teaching the programme.

Table 2. Teachers' encouraging actions during the lessons.

Themes and subthemes	Mentions	Example quotes
Sensitivity and tact		
Respectful directing/teaching	13	'I especially wanted to think about the expression, how to maintain the joy in it.' (Lea)
Proceeding at the student's pace	13	
Creating sense of involvement/belonging	10	'I first listened out to what their mood was.' (Olivia)
Face-work on the behalf of the students	10	
Permissive atmosphere	8	
Connection with students	10	
Drama contract	2	
Total	66	
Feedback and encouragement		
Praising and encouraging the students	24	'I gave them feedback, tried to give it very readily and praise effortlessly.' (Paula)
Teacher participating in activities	6	
Total	30	
Effort		
Effort put to enable positive experiences and learning	6	'Then, together with another teacher, we arranged these seats for the audience and taught how to behave in the theatre. We discussed it with the students and the audience, we respected the audience as much as the actors.' (Sofia)
Editing/applying the programme (during the lesson or in advance)	13	
Total	19	'I saw when their concentration started to slip, so I was like "let's take a pause and then get back to this after it"'. (Kati)

The drama activities and the goal to perform the play were often reported as one of the stirring factors. All the interviewed teachers noticed how many students managed to read more than usual because they were concentrating on rehearsing the play.

Table 3. Teachers' discouraging actions during the lessons and teachers' attributions for challenges.

Themes and subthemes	Mentions	Example quotes
Insufficient encounter		
Pressuring to participate	7	'There was some persuading, like "okay, let's get working, it's your turn now. Try now, would you." With this coaxing tactic I tried to get them to participate at least with some volume.' (Minna)
Putting the programme/play ahead of students' needs	7	
Neglecting group development	7	'Well, the drama contract thing felt somehow challenging. That was another thing they didn't get at all, they didn't see any point in it, so we didn't go through it at all.' (Maria)
Failing to listen	6	
Neglecting drama contract	2	
Performing presented negatively	2	
Total	31	
Teacher attributes challenges to students		
Belittling of students' abilities/attitudes	16	'When we tried to practise the scenes properly, who comes where and so on, it was little like ... a mess, they were the least self-regulative. It was so laborious, they just didn't get it at all, how it should proceed.' (Maria)
Student reluctance in participation	9	
Challenging behaviour of students	3	
Total	28	
Teacher attributes challenges to extrinsic factors		
Programme demotivating	4	'In order to include more drama and acting into the lessons we would have needed another kind of classroom.' (Minna)
Challenging classroom space	3	
Problems in schedules	1	'From the teacher's point of view it is more arduous than normal practising.' (Maria)
Programme arduous	1	
Total	9	
Teacher attributes challenges to themselves		
Unwillingness to participate in activities or express oneself	4	'I could have been more enthusiastic myself, I also think that I could have been, had the situation with the other class been less stressful.' (Maria)
Experience of insufficient skills in directing drama/theatre	2	
Inadequate preparation	1	
Total	7	

This motivated them a lot. Reading didn't feel obligatory, but there was another aim, performance. The kids didn't think they were Reading, they were rehearsing a play!

–
And the enthusiasm they felt towards reading! No one said: 'I don't want to read', or 'blah, why are we reading', but the reading happened kind of accidentally, which was wonderful. And they all read very long passages but didn't realise they were reading. If we had had the school storybook and read the same amount from it, I think many of them would have been exhausted from all the reading. (Tiina)

They enjoyed their time with their students and spoke warm-heartedly and compassionately about their students' experiences:

Well, first in my mind is this one student who has tremendous challenges – in understanding instructions and reading in general. He should be in grade 3, but he is repeating grade 2. When we started this project, he barely read words. And his attitude is: 'I don't want to read'. Once, when we started practising the script, reading scenes 1–4 and ending the lesson there. And this student, who never ever wanted to read, said to me: 'let me read more!' He wanted to continue! Then I thought, this is the biggest accomplishment ever, he voluntarily wanted to read! – I was like, this boy has been to school for three years and never ever have I heard them say this! (Emilia)

DERT was seen as an encouraging way of practising oral reading fluency. Many of the teachers witnessed certain, maybe unexpected blossoming from students they considered reserved or unenthusiastic about reading or acting.

In them I also saw this blooming, indeed, during regular lessons they are very shy and quiet, even unnoticed, mouse-like, and here they were completely different ... – they gained this new confidence, 'this is what I want', 'this I like' attitude and so on. (Irene)

Several teachers also described positive development in the students' attitude towards reading, as Kati expressed:

Like, these kids have negative experiences about reading, it could even be scary. So, we have gained such good, positive experiences, moments of attainment like: 'I'm able', and: 'if I make a mistake, it doesn't matter'.

Moreover, Maria describes similar experiences:

Maybe one of them, who is a little quieter, to whom expressing oneself clearly is more difficult. – They had experiences of attainment when they kind of dared to participate more with the group.

From how the teachers described their experiences, we gained an impression that overall, the participants saw DERT as an encouraging, enjoyable, and motivational approach which is highly beneficial in numerous areas of learning, not pertaining solely to reading development. Naturally reading-related skills and attitudes were mentioned most often, but all the interviewees saw that participating in DERT enhances e.g. the students' perceptions of self and their social interaction. Since the respondents saw DERT as a very beneficial and inspiring approach to reading practice, we wanted to examine the reasons why. Why are the students this enthusiastic about reading, when engaged in DERT? As we have discussed in the introduction, the teacher's manner of being present with the students is important. Next, we will discuss in more detail what teacher actions we identified.

Q2: teachers' actions during the DERT lessons

When looking at teachers' accounts of their experiences, we noticed that some teachers indicated more eagerly, and in more detail, how they saw the programme as beneficial and inspiring. We then scrutinised how they described the lesson proceedings. We realised that some of the teachers described more how much effort they had seen to make the DERT programme work for the students with diverse special needs. These teachers also had managed to create an exceptionally playful, warm, and safe atmosphere, in which it was easy for these students to participate.

They really liked when I immersed in the characters. Several times they asked: 'read it again! It's so funny when you do it!' And I noticed that when I immersed myself in the roles, they kind of instinctively started doing the same. (Emilia)

These present results seem to align with Toivanen, Antikainen, and Ruismäki (2012, 559–561). They studied Finnish drama teachers' perceptions of what makes a drama lesson succeed or fail. Their respondents described three factors that impact drama lessons: interactive teaching skills, knowledge in group development and external factors.

To examine this perception further, we explored our second research question, (2) What does the teacher do in the successful readers' theatre lessons? We thematised the sequences where teachers describe with warmth and enthusiasm their own actions and communication with the group into three main categories and 11 subcategories. These thematisations are presented in Table 2. As discussed in the introduction, teacher sensitivity and teacher's own effort to make the drama lessons safe is crucial. Our results indicate that teachers did in fact perform actions that supported a safe learning environment. We cannot tell whether it was innate or due to conscious decision making, but identifying these factors from the data supports our thinking about safe learning environment in drama educational context.

Emilia described how their students had a group of remarkably slow readers with several challenges in learning and executive functions. They even mentioned that performing a play would have been impossible for this group. The teacher decided to make a short film instead of performing a live show. It seemed that this teacher went through massive trouble to enable the students with rewarding experiences and accomplishments. We see this kind of effort made for enabling the students' accomplishments as acts of pedagogical love (Maatta and Uusiautti 2013, 99). The teacher describes especially one student and their challenges, and how the teacher made an effort for the student to succeed:

They got a lot of experiences of accomplishment because we did it in bits. They themselves understand that they can't perform like the others. But now that we filmed it a bit at a time, 'now pull the sleeve and pull them into hiding' this little at a time. Then we can take: 'Now take the instructions from the bushes', where the characters are hiding. Then they was grinning like a Cheshire cat because they received so much positive feedback. – And they never came grumbling to these lessons, though normally they aren't that motivated towards school for everything is so difficult to them. They are a student who should be in a special needs education group; their challenges are that massive. But anyway, it was wonderful how excited they have been, even though this must be so difficult for them.

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Without filming on iPad this wouldn't have succeeded. But what's most important, the students got an amazing experience of accomplishment and a great experience. Besides

editing it [the film], I added music to the final edition, and the outcome was rather successful.
(Emilia)

While exploring the teachers' own contribution to DERT lessons, we also identified some challenges in the teachers' interactions with the students. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of what it takes to teach DERT successfully, we need to examine challenges in teacher-student interaction. According to Weiner's (1985; 1992, 230) attribution theory, the factors for success or failure can be attributed to either intrinsic or extrinsic causes and, moreover, to stable and fluctuating traits. Three of the teachers more eagerly attributed the programme's failings to external factors, such as the student quality and their attitudes.

From the teachers' accounts, we interpreted a certain willingness to attribute the success of the DERT programme to the students. Often, even the teachers who described having put in significant effort did not see the programme succeed due to their own actions. For example, Sofia seemed to attribute the attainment to the students: 'By the way, I would recommend this to teachers, this is easy peasy! The kids indeed start steering it [the activity].' The teachers rarely explicitly recognised their own actions as the cause of success in DERT. However, these teachers' positive actions leading to success could be interpreted from the data.

Three of the interviewed teachers described feeling some dissatisfaction towards the DERT lessons. They attributed the challenges to the students or external conditions and only occasionally to themselves. These are introduced in more detail further in [Table 3](#). We saw some moments in teachers' descriptions of their experiences where there could be recognised a lack of effort in differentiation or applying the DERT programme to serve individual students better. We got an impression that these teachers concentrated more on running through the programme instead of seeing what kind of approach fits best for these students or caring how they are currently feeling.

When I tried to keep them on the correct page, it took so much time. I should have directed almost all of them like 'now remember, turn the page'. Maybe because of this it started to feel like there's no slightest hint of reason in performing the play. (Maria)

From the example above and other similar cues, we got the impression that Maria felt the workload of the DERT programme unbeatable. Also, it seemed that Maria felt discouraged to enable the students' learning and enhance their experiences of attainment, compared to what we saw Emilia do.

Another example of not listening to the students' needs was what Laura told us: 'My own ambitions [about the play] had raised so high that I had hoped I could have squeezed more out of the students.' It seems that this teacher failed to maintain the main aim, practising reading, as their focus. Rehearsing a play seemed to be their primary value, instead of making reading practice fun using the DERT approach. Instead of focusing on developing intrinsic motivation as suggested in Deci and Ryan (2000) SDT, this teacher used external rewards to motivate the students to do more homework: 'Then I had a little carrot there, who has practised the most, gets a small prize. And if you learn your lines by heart, you get a big prize' (Laura). The teacher continues describing one of their students:

They too made mistakes in reading. – maybe they like reading that little, they tried to learn the lines by heart – they tried to remember the lines, and when they didn't, they were baffled.

And then I said 'you are allowed to read, you don't have to remember', they just didn't want to read, they had decided to do it without [the script]. (Laura)

The student's behaviour is understandable, they likely wished to receive the promised prize. Which, we must add, was not a part of the DERT programme. Nevertheless, it seems that this teacher mostly maintained a positive atmosphere within the student group:

Every time I cheered and praised, encouraged them, and, of course, corrected them during reading. But it was fun how they began to correct each other, somehow in a way that it became strengthening instead of diminishing. Everyone wanted to help even the weakest one to succeed. (Laura)

It is understandable for a teacher with little experience in drama activities to feel compelled to follow a given programme in a certain manner. There might be a pressure to succeed and 'do right' when executing a research programme, even if voluntariness and listening to students and accommodating to their needs is an essential part of the programme. One teacher tried to persuade reluctant students into participating by telling them how important it is to participate in the DERT group and provide crucial data to the researchers. 'I always highlighted that this is a research study, and the researcher gave these instructions – we are participating in a fine research project. I stressed it very many times' (Heidi). Persuasion of this kind is apt to diminish the students' sense of relatedness and autonomy, which inhibits one's intrinsic motivation to participate and might thus inhibit the formation of a safe learning environment.

The thematisations in [Table 3](#) are diverse in orientation. The first of them, titled 'Insufficient encounter', is the only one interpreted from interviewees' accounts. In the three following ones we thematised the teachers' reasons for less successful actions.

None of the teachers seem to have recognised any lack of listening or interaction with their students or like to think of themselves as insensitive to the students' needs. We made these conclusions from subtle, implicit hints, which can be recognised from an outside perspective. It might be that to preserve one's face it is easier for the participants to attribute the failure to extrinsic factors such as student's lack of interest or unwillingness to participate. However, the reason behind this student behaviour can be deciphered from factors collected in the first category in [Table 3](#) and thus attributed to the teachers' actions. For example, in one of the student groups, two students failed to get over the feeling that they were forced to join the group of poor readers. Participating in research groups has the potential danger of being labelled as a poor student or an outcast.

The teacher executing the programme has an important role in promoting participation and what it means to be involved in a research project at school. Students' sense of inferiority greatly hinders successful part-taking in any small group activity. In this case, such a situation caused massive trouble for the DERT to succeed. As Heidi told us, two students were extremely unwilling to participate in DERT. These two students did not regularly attend special education teacher's lessons, and according to the teacher they did not feel comfortable joining the group.

I remember from the first time, the other of these girls – when I said 'come sit here in the circle'. I had put bean bag chairs for everyone, it was a rather small space. And I was like, 'come on' and she sat with her back towards us. This fifth grader girl. Then I said 'listen,

now that you are here in reader's theatre it is very important that we see each other's faces, now turn around'. Then she turned sideways. This was how it started. She was very much like 'I don't want to be here', like all her bodily habitus, it [the resistance] was visible in body language. (Heidi)

It seems that the teacher was pressured to fulfil the research programme and 'make things work', which led them to fail to meet the students' needs. Would there have been a way to see behind the students' behaviour and thus mitigate their anxiety towards participation? Anttila explains her view:

[d]ialogical atmosphere can hardly evolve by telling students that they should behave in a certain way. I think that it streams out from the teacher as a concrete, embodied occurrence. It evolves when the teacher turns towards the students and sends them a message through his/her whole being: I am interested in you. I am here for you, for each and every one of you, unreservedly, all-inclusively. (Anttila 2003, 302–303)

When the teacher has only a little experience in drama education, teaching a willing and easy-going group is manageable, and learning aims can be reached. When working with students who are doubtful about drama activities, more expertise to make the atmosphere safe and comfortable is needed.

Discussion

Regarding our first research question, 'What kind of an approach do teachers find readers' theatre to be, and what benefits do the teachers see in DERT?' the respondents all saw DERT as diversely beneficial, which they mostly attributed to the drama educational DERT's embodied and holistic view of learning. It is important to notice that reported benefits were mostly related to enjoyment, motivation and personal growth (i.e. Table 2 subtheme 'Increase in performing courage'), but also improved reading skills were mentioned frequently, as also e.g. Kulo, Odundo, and Kibui (2021) have identified. None of the participants reported any disadvantages for the students. Is the DERT programme in itself so fun, interesting, and liberating that the students flourish only because of that? Yes, the approach has its own appeal. Much also depends on how the teacher is present with the group and its individuals (Van Manen 1991; 2008).

Why did the teachers find DERT this appealing and beneficial and why did they seldom explicitly reason that the benefits were due to their own actions? Good teachers are committed to their work and well-being of their students, thus manifesting pedagogical love in their actions. As Maatta and Uusiautti (2013, 96) claim: '[I]love, at its best, is manifested by the endeavour to make things develop, grow, and come forward, whether love falls on other people, art, science, ideas, or nature'. Moreover, while drama activities often evoke emotions, the most successful teachers have been present with the group. This active sensing of their emotions and needs lead to providing appropriate acceptance and support to the students 'to blossom', as was often referred to by the interviewees. Perhaps this manifestation of pedagogical love shifts the teachers' focus from themselves to the students' well-being. While teachers concentrate on the accomplishments of the students, they ignore their own selves.

Our second research question was 'How does the teacher operate in the successful readers' theatre lessons?'. We discovered that the teacher's pedagogical sensitivity and

tact rose as one of the major themes. Only when the teacher reacts even to the slightest cues of the student's body language can the shy students reach a safe enough space to overcome one's self-doubt and prejudices. The world of drama is captivating and delightful but also demanding. The participants, including the teacher, must give a lot of themselves for the 'magic to happen'. As Toivanen and Kaasinen (2013, 492) discuss, for a drama lesson to succeed, the teacher needs 'quick pedagogical decision-making, intuition and spontaneous response to pupils' actions and proposals in order to create pedagogical interaction'. These proposals may be dissenting and simultaneous, and the coexistence of drama and reading practice complicates the situation even more.

It is an elementary skill of a drama teacher to attune one's communication to different situations and differing needs of the students. In DERT, where one student needs more encouragement in fluent reading and prosody, another needs it in expressive reading. One might be too shy to participate in a drama activity, and the next is so anxious about everything that their behaviour challenges classroom management. All these students might be working on the same project, aiming towards a performance for a live audience. A drama teacher must take many roles simultaneously (Wales 2009, 275). Teachers must choose and vary between how to communicate with a group and its individuals, which requires sensitivity and tact (Toivanen and Kaasinen 2013; Van Manen 1991; 2008). Applying DERT to schools' reading practice requires more effort from the teacher compared to regular oral reading drill practices. As DERT seems hugely more rewarding for the students, we think that the prize is worth the effort – students motivated in practising reading and enjoying themselves.

As discussed in the introduction and identified in the results section, a successful drama education lesson demands intuitive presence, emotional availability and listening to participants' needs. Due to the embodied nature of drama, reading and classroom collaboration, it is important to maintain an intercorporeal connection between the teacher and the students. From these interviews, we saw that this sensitivity needs more than following given implementation instructions. Any qualified and experienced classroom or special education teacher can clearly steer the group through this programme and may even gain fine results. However, for the drama activities and practising reading to fully bloom, teachers need to be willing to immerse themselves into activities and be ready to strive more in making the programme activities and their style of encouragement fit best for the students in question.

All the participants were teachers with years of teaching experience. However, the majority did not have any studies in drama education, so regarding a drama pedagogical perspective, most of them were novices. There are many special questions regarding drama teaching and encountering the students in a drama context, as mentioned in the article. Our research focuses on these unique features of drama education, disregarding the teachers' general teaching experience. Accordingly, as highlighted in this article, drama motivates the students. We claim that it should be more thoroughly included in basic education, but with care and expertise, not merely through following a manual without any prior knowledge of the possibilities or implications of drama work. As knowledge in drama education not only provide expertise in using drama as a tool for learning, but also a rich base in embodied knowing and pedagogical love, we suggest that more studies in drama education should be incorporated into the classroom teacher education in the Finnish universities.

Research integrity

It is noteworthy that the data were collected from teachers interested in participating in the study and implementing a drama educational approach in reading instruction. The data were collected from enthusiastic teachers who have a positive attitude towards using drama in their teaching, which is a factor that cannot be overlooked while interpreting the results. The experiences might be different, had the data been collected from teachers who were unable to choose whether to participate in the implementation study. In addition, only 12 of the 35 teachers who carried out the DERT programme were interviewed. Even though the data were rich, a larger sample size might have provided us more information about different views on DERT. Many respondents mentioned their inexperience as drama teachers. They rarely commented on directing the theatrical performance. Had we framed the interview questions as guiding towards artistic issues, we might have gathered more information about directing the play, role-taking issues or other issues relating to drama teaching. On the other hand, the focus was on using drama as a pedagogical method to teach another subject. It is expected that dramatic skills remain in secondary status then.

Most participants described their experience positively and the teaching experiment as a success. We as researchers cannot be sure how genuine the experience and the telling of it was. We must trust the telling and our interpretation but also acknowledge the vulnerability of the data. The first author who interviewed the teachers also introduced and taught the programme to the participants. As she appeared as a researcher, a mentor and a drama expert to the participants, the versatile relationship between interviewee and interviewer could cause bias (Boeije 2010). She recognised a few moments, when the interviewee might have felt an urge to appear more positive towards drama education because of the interviewer's position:

I'm interested in so many different things, it's been kind of easy to neglect drama. – Now I'm trying to clean up my act, but we'll see how it goes. (Laura)

Mainly, the interview situations seemed to proceed without such need on the participants' behalf. Since the interviewer is also a teacher, there is also a certain *we-ness*. The interviewer and interviewee shared knowledge about educational questions, so the current topics were familiar to both. This most often led to a mutual feeling of connectedness and understanding of the discussed themes.

The interviews were conducted from days to weeks after completing the eight-week programme to allow for teacher reflection. According to Van Manen (2008, 1), teachers' actions are often intuitive and instant; the teachers do not have the time to reflect when in immediate contact with the students. Reflection happens afterwards, not in the moment. However, we must make our interpretations and conclusions relying on the interviewees' memories, which poses its own challenges to forming an overall view of the interviewees' experiences. Additionally, for some, we might not have succeeded in asking the right questions. Nevertheless, the interviews seemed to provide a good overall picture of what had happened during the implementation programme. The results rely on what the participating teachers have described how the implementation went in the classroom. Had we interviewed their students as well, it would have shed light more versatily on the themes. However, we focused on the teachers' experience

and drew conclusions regarding our research questions from their input. It is important to study the teachers' views, for they are in a key position in including DERT as a part of their local curricula.

Teacher–student relationships are often studied through observation. Using observation, we might gain impartial knowledge, as interviewees might tend to remember and describe the favourable moments. The teachers may have an urge to save the faces of their students or themselves and thus present the events positively. Since embodied interaction is an essential part of RT and drama education, and is demanding to make visible through interviews, we propose an observation study on DERT lessons to gain insight into embodied student engagement and resistance and how the teacher reacts to them.

Conclusion

The call to participate in the implementation study received almost 90 interested teachers with minor advertising. Therefore, we can conclude that new ways of supporting reading and drama teaching in general can be considered a topic of interest and need among both classroom teachers and special education teachers in Finland.

The results highlight the importance of pedagogical sensitivity in successful DERT. Moreover, teacher enthusiasm, tact, and ability to react and modify teaching, and their understanding of the programme goals are important factors underlying successful drama teaching. The teachers' experience was that the DERT programme was highly beneficial in developing reading skills and other areas of learning.

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Appendix. Interview design

- 1) Teacherhood and interest towards DERT:
 - a. What kind of a teacher do you see yourself as?
 - b. What is important for you in teaching?
 - c. What is your relationship with drama teaching? What do you think of drama as a teaching method?
 - d. Do you use drama in your teaching, or do you teach drama as a subject?
 - e. Why should drama be used as a teaching method, or why should it not?
 - f. What made you interested in participating in this study?
- 2) First, I'd like you to tell me freely about your experiences with this programme. What was it like? What did you notice during the experiment?

The following questions (3.–8.) according to respondents' answers, if their spontaneous answers did not include the themes already.

- 3) What observations did you make about the DERT programme?
 - a. What did DERT replace from the regular classroom work?
 - b. How did you adapt the programme? Did you leave out something?
 - c. In your view, how does the programme fit to special education and practising reading?
- 4) What observations did you make about your own teaching and directing the play?
 - a. How did the directing of the group go?
 - b. Were there any challenges?
 - c. Was there something especially easy/rewarding? Any special accomplishments?
 - d. How did you direct/instruct the expressive reading practise?
 - e. How did you give feedback? How did it affect the students?
 - f. Did you notice any changes in teacher–student relationships?
 - g. Could you describe possible challenges or successes in managing the group?
- 5) How do you find drama as an approach to practising reading? Any pros or cons?
- 6) Did you perform the play to an outsider audience? To whom? To you, what is the relevance of performing the play in the end?
- 7) What observations did you make about the participating students?
 - a. What factors did you consider when choosing the DERT students?
 - b. How did the students receive the programme in the beginning?
 - c. Did you notice any changes in the students during the programme? If yes, what kind?
 - d. What did you notice about student-to-student interaction?
- 8) What kind of effects did you notice in the students? E.g. their reading skills, motivation, perception of self, attitudes? What else?
- 9) Last, I want to present to you an imaginary scenario: What if I told you that DERT is as efficient as so-called traditional oral reading practice, and that DERT does not reduce the need for support next year. Do you see any additional value in DERT? If yes, what?
- 10) Would you like to tell me something more about any topic?