



Exploring the Significance and Implementation of Drama Games in Secondary School Drama Curriculum

Yueyang Liu

University of Malaya, Faculty of Creative Arts, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: Lyy19961223@163.com

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to explore the causes, current state, and manifestations of drama education, with a particular focus on the significance of game design in drama education curricula for classroom effectiveness and teaching practices. This raises the research question of curriculum design and organization in drama education. Through a case analysis of school club classes, the article emphasizes the liberating nature of theatrical games, which help foster students' creativity, focus, and other skills. However, theatrical education in china still faces shortcomings and requires multifaceted efforts to ensure its development.

Keywords: Drama education; Theatrical games; Classroom effectiveness

1 Drama education in China

Drama education in China is currently lagging behind Western countries such as the United Kingdom, North America, and Canada in terms of comprehensive development and progress. It has yet to form concrete educational concepts and philosophies in the public mindset. The concept of "drama education" remains vague, and the lack of clarity in curriculum construction is a pressing issue that needs attention. This indicates that although drama education in China started relatively late, there is significant room for improvement.

1.1 Introduction of drama education in China

The emergence of drama as an art form in China can be traced back to the last century. According to Zhang Bingyu, during the New Culture Movement, traditional Chinese opera underwent reforms and incorporated Western realistic theatrical forms.^[1] The lifelike performance style of drama, which combines various elements such as language, movement, and dance on stage, is more relatable to the general public, making it easier to be accepted. In addition to its significant performative and entertaining qualities, drama has long been recognized for its educational applications in foreign countries.

As early as the late 19th century, American educationalist John Dewey initiated a series of drama activities in schools, emphasizing the notion that "dramatic play is a child's instinct." In the 1970s, British drama educator Dorothy Heathcote introduced the renowned theory of "mantle of the expert," which found extensive application in educational drama. In 1996, Professor Li Yingning attended a drama education conference in the United Kingdom and introduced the concepts of "DIE" (Drama in Education) and "TIE" (Theatre in Education) upon returning to mainland China.^[2] Professor Huang Aihua from Hangzhou Normal University proposed three practical models of educational drama: subject-oriented drama education, permeative drama education, and activity-based drama education.^[3]

Furthermore, the educational advantages of Hong Kong and Taiwan have allowed their drama education philosophies to influence mainland China.

1.2 Current development status and causes at the present stage

As mentioned earlier, since the introduction of drama education from the West, its development has been slow in China. Firstly, there is a lag in the mindset of teachers and parents. Art education is still largely focused on well-established art forms such as music, dance, and visual arts. Many view drama education as simply teaching children how to act. Additionally, the overall educational context in China is under significant pressure, with parents primarily concerned about academic performance. Art education, including drama, is often judged solely based on its final outcomes, such as whether students have opportunities to perform on stage or play leading roles. These utilitarian thoughts prevail. However, Brian Way believes that the focus of educational drama is not about teaching children how to act but rather about cultivating their character and promoting holistic development through theatrical means.^[4] Although educational drama has been incorporated into the new curriculum standards and the release of the "Double Reduction Policy" in 2021, which provides some space for the development of drama education, it remains mostly limited to first-tier cities and schools with good educational resources. It has not been fully popularized, and achieving widespread implementation is still a desire that may take several more years to fulfill. Currently, in schools, drama education appears mainly in the following two forms.

1.3 Forms of drama education

According to the research by Fu Yu and Feng Mengyu, the current forms of drama education in China can be broadly categorized into two main types. Firstly, there is the integration of drama as a means to serve subject-based education.^[5] This teaching approach is commonly seen in English classrooms, where drama is used as a supplementary tool to facilitate learning. It emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge through the use of drama. The second type involves the establishment of drama clubs or societies as extracurricular activities, where students voluntarily participate.^[6] In this approach, drama education is more flexible and comprehensive. Since extracurricular activities are separate from subject-based curriculum, various teaching arrangements

can be implemented within these drama clubs. They can encompass a range of activities, including drama games, appreciation of theatrical performances, improvisation, script creation, and stage presentations.

2 Drama club class—Case Analysis

2.1 Background introduction

The school is located in a second-tier city where drama education has never been introduced in classrooms or clubs before. It is a novel concept for both the school and students, carrying a lot of unknowns. The target audience for this drama class is the first-year students, with a few of them having some stage experience mainly as hosts for school events. However, the majority of the students have not had any real exposure to "drama" or "performance." As they are approaching the college entrance examination (gaokao), the students are under high pressure, and the learning atmosphere is consistently tense. Apart from achieving basic educational goals, the drama course aims to use a scientifically constructed curriculum to help students release stress, reconnect with their true selves, and find their own identities.

Approximately 80 students signed up for the class. The drama club class is held in the school gymnasium, which provides ample space to accommodate several hundred people. The students are divided into several small groups, ensuring a balanced gender ratio in each group. Before the start of the class, the students are asked to form circles within their respective groups and sit in their designated spaces, allowing them to get acquainted with their group members.

The main difference between drama education and traditional subject-based education lies in the fact that drama education places the students at the center of the classroom, with the teacher acting as a supportive participant. Once the class begins, instead of having the groups remain in their separate circles, the teacher gathers all the groups in the center to form a large circle. It is evident that there is no intermingling among the members of different groups; each person is still surrounded by familiar group members on their left and right. However, the teacher does not make any additional requests and proceeds directly to the first part of the lesson – drama games – to break down barriers. By having them perform a play, they can practice all their language skills so that they learn to communicate in a contextualised way. Performing a play also promotes intercultural understanding.^[11]

2.2 Teaching content

Turtle Game - After everyone forms a circle, extend the index finger of the left hand and the palm of the right hand. Place the palm of the right hand on top of the extended index finger of the student on the right. When the teacher says "Turtle," grab the index finger. This requires a quick response from the extended left hand to escape, while the right hand simultaneously grabs the finger.

Clap on "7"- Again, everyone forms a circle to play this game. Starting from a designated student, each person counts sequentially. When a number contains "7" or is

a multiple of “7”, clap your hands. If someone claps incorrectly or counts incorrectly, they are eliminated.

2.3 Teaching effectiveness

After the first round of the "Turtle" game, the overall state of the students transitioned from initially being tense and on edge to becoming more relaxed. After a couple of rounds of the game, the teacher suggested that the students switch positions to ensure that different groups were intermingled, breaking the familiarity of the previous environment. The students willingly accepted the suggestion and were able to quickly engage in the game even after the position exchange, showing no signs of awkwardness. By the final round of the "Turtle" game, the students' emotions reached a peak, presenting a stark contrast to their initial reserve and unease. During the second game, the students became fully immersed and focused on the collective, paying close attention to the counting of their neighboring classmates and observing their surroundings. The drama games created an environment where students were entirely engaged, with their attention directed towards the people around them and the environment they were in. By the end of the drama game teaching, the students' emotions and state had completely opened up, achieving the goal of unleashing their natural selves. This also created a prerequisite for the following themes of improvisation, role-playing, and other course activities. Some scholars have also confirmed that dramatic play can help students escape their problems and free themselves from the constraints of life.^[12]

2.4 The importance of drama games

The purpose of introducing art education into primary and secondary schools is to cultivate students' artistic literacy and achieve their overall development. Drama, as a form of integrated art, has always been the focus of scholars' research in terms of its ultimate teaching objectives. Through literature research, Wang Yi mentioned in his doctoral dissertation that drama possesses unique openness and autonomy, which can cultivate individuals' imagination, creativity, and critical thinking.^[7] Professor Li Yingning also emphasized that drama can foster students' abilities in thinking, observing, and making judgments. Therefore, achieving these teaching objectives requires the rationality and scientific nature of the teaching process, making the importance of games in drama education undeniable. As mentioned in the above case, drama games create a positive learning environment for teaching. Initially, students have not yet detached themselves from the disciplinary classrooms, but through drama games, they can alleviate their tension and stress. The game format allows students to experience fun, stimulate their interest and engagement, and enhance their classroom participation.

According to the curriculum schedule, after drama games and element exercises, the course will progress to improvisation and role-playing, with the advanced version requiring a stronger foundation. Drama games also provide a certain groundwork, such as fostering student cooperation and teamwork. Through the aforementioned games, students shift their focus from themselves to the collective, which is a fundamental

requirement of stage performance. Renowned acting master Sanford Meisner advocated focusing on the scene partner, maintaining a state of connection, experiencing the truth of the present moment, and responding instinctively.^[8] Furthermore, theatrical performances also require collaborative efforts to be accomplished. Not only actors but every member plays an indispensable and important role, whether it be a director, playwright, set designer, and more. Therefore, conducting drama games within a team is to prepare for the subsequent courses.

The selection of games is also crucial, avoiding games that are irrelevant or meaningless to the curriculum. The games in this club class also train students' bodies and senses. The "Little Turtle" game trains their physical imagery and responsiveness. Stanislavski emphasized the "Physical Method," and Meyerhold proposed "Biomechanics," both focusing on the actor's physicality and physical expression. Based on the "trinity" theory of the actor, which includes the creator, the creative tool, and the work, the creative tool is the actor's body. Drama games are adept at stimulating bodily instincts and achieving an organic integration of internal and external factors. Furthermore, there is training for the senses. In "dramatic performance," emphasis is placed on authenticity - truly listening, truly observing, truly experiencing. For example, when students hear "Little Turtle," they instinctively react by "catching" or "escaping." In the game "Clap on 7," they focus on listening to the number called out by the person beside them to determine whether to "count" or "clap." These actions are similar to listening to the lines and subtext of the opponent in theatrical performance and deciding the next stage action. Huang Jinhui proposed that communication is one of the important elements on the drama stage, including communication between performers and communication between performers and the audience. Through games, students open up all their sensory organs and engage in authentic communication with their opponents.

In the performing arts majors at professional art schools, the first semester of the freshman year is centered around "element exercises" in the performance courses. The purpose is to train students in the seven powers and four senses. The seven powers include imagination, observation, attention, sensitivity, thinking, adaptability, and expressiveness, while the four senses consist of a sense of reality, imagery, humor, and rhythm. Each of these elements is crucial in the development of secondary school students' organizational cultivation. To sum up, the significance of "drama games" in a well-designed drama club course cannot be underestimated. It should be the initial phase of enjoyable element training before moving on to the stage of performance creation. Following this teaching method, the current club class aligns with it. After concluding the games, the teacher assigns an improvisational performance creation task with the theme "Past, Present, Future." Each group is given 15 minutes of rehearsal time and 3 minutes of stage presentation. Through ice-breaking games, participants' imagination is unleashed, and their bodies are no longer constrained. They no longer fear the scrutiny of others and solely focus on their performance. As a result, the final stage presentation achieves the expected teaching objectives.

3 Drama classroom—Breaking the Fourth Wall

Richard Schechner, a renowned American theater theorist, introduced the theory of "environmental theater," which breaks away from traditional theatrical performance methods and offers new insights and aesthetic pursuits regarding the relationship between the audience and performers.^[9] Schechner challenges conventional forms of theater, breaking the norms on traditional stages and transforming the audience into active participants. He believes that "all spaces are not only performance areas but also areas for observation," breaking the barrier between actors and audience members and dismantling the walls between the stage and the seating area. Liu Changqi has also highlighted the enlightening impact of Schechner's theory of environmental theater on art education in his research.

The classroom design in drama education differs from traditional classrooms in terms of space. It doesn't have a podium or desks and chairs. Instead, students sit in a circle on the floor, breaking away from the traditional teacher-centered approach and unveiling the long-standing curtain between the podium and desks.^[10] It truly places students at the center, rather than the teacher. In the context of China's exam-oriented education system, the traditional classroom follows a teacher-centered teaching method where students passively listen to the teacher's lecture. This rote-style education often leads to a low classroom atmosphere, limited communication between the teacher and students, and all students focusing their attention on the teacher. With the podium as the center, there is a "fourth wall" separating the teacher and students. The distribution of students on three sides and the teacher occupying the fourth side resembles the spatial arrangement of a traditional stage, which easily restricts students' self-development. In the new century, the educational philosophy revolves around student-centered learning, which aligns well with the classroom approach in drama education. In the drama classroom, every student can actively participate and become the protagonist of the class, playing their own roles. The teaching method in drama education is different from traditional academic subjects. In the drama classroom, there is no absolute right or wrong, no standard answer, and no rigid grading criteria. It only requires students to open their hearts, experience the present moment, and unleash their authentic selves. In the classroom, students can establish a spiritual connection and engage in soulful communication with the teacher and classmates.

4 Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the research results, it can be concluded that drama games, as a teaching method, have a positive impact in drama classroom. They can stimulate students' creativity and imagination, cultivate their independent thinking and sensitivity, and help them transition from being traditional classroom students to performer. Drama games create a relaxed learning environment. Drama education requires the comprehensive use of different teaching methods, starting with games before moving on to performances, forming a complete teaching system. Many teachers use the arts as a teaching tool as well as a discipline in their own right - not to adorn other subject areas,

but to illuminate and explain them.^[13] As with drama games, they are not decorating the classroom, but are there for the ultimate classroom goal.

References

1. Zhang, B.Y. (2020). The Function and Application of Programmes in Theatre Performance in Training and Performance (Doctoral dissertation, Shanghai Theatre Academy).<https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CDFDLAST2020&filename=1020658731.nh>
2. Li, Y.N. (1997). Drama education and theatre education in Britain. *Theatre Arts* (01), 56-61.
3. Huang, A.H. (1997). Exploration and practice: theatre education in the context of new curriculum reform. Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press.
4. Slade, P. (1958) An introduction to child drama. London: University of London Press.
5. Fu, Y. (2018). Theoretical and Practical Research on the Use of Educational Drama for Primary and Secondary School Teachers (Doctoral dissertation, Shanxi Normal University).<https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CDFDLAST2019&filename=1019025555.nh>
6. Feng, M. (2019). *Learning to teach moral education through drama in a Chinese primary school* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Warwick).
7. Wang, Y. (2019). Research on School Education Drama (Doctoral dissertation, East China Normal University). Retrieved from <https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CDFDLAST2019&filename=1019835491.nh>.
8. He, Y & You, X. (2017). A study of "repetition exercise" in Meisner's method. *Theatre Arts* (05), 70-78. doi:10.13737/j.cnki.ta.2017.05.008.
9. Schechner, R. (1989). Environmental theatre-space. *Theatre Arts*.
10. Liu, C.Q. (2014). Richard Schechner's environmental theatre theory on art education. *Art Garden* (05), 24-26.
11. Angelianawati, L. (2019). Using Drama in EFL Classroom. *Journal of English Teaching*, 5(2), 125-134.
12. Shahbazi, M., & Yazdani, S. (2017). The Impact of Dramatic Games on Education and Creativity. *International Journal of Educational Sciences*, 19(1), 6-9.
13. McCaslin, N. (2006). Creative Drama In The Classroom And Beyond 8E.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

