

# Chinese Drama Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education: From Picture Book to Process Drama

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## To cite this article:

Xiaotong Chen. Chinese Drama Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education: From Picture Book to Process Drama. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 10, No. 3, 2022, pp. 175-181. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20221003.14

**Received:** April 13, 2022; **Accepted:** May 9, 2022; **Published:** May 24, 2022

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**Abstract:** In recent years, with the support of national policies, Chinese drama pedagogy stayed in a significant stage of development. The preschool period is the social development stage of young children. The social development of young children affects all aspects of psychological development and directly influences the final formation of children's personalities. This paper has preschool children (3-6 years old) as participants and uses experiential reading picture book thematic curriculum as examples. Based on these participants and examples, they argue how to apply dramatic play in preschool education for young children through describing and discussing the drama pedagogy from picture books to process drama in early childhood education and through exploring the theoretical significance of children's rights and protection and young children's socialization in early childhood education. This paper also helps preschool children better adapt to their future social life, learn social rules, enrich their positive emotions, and promote the full development of young children's moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and social aspects through proper guidance.

**Keywords:** Drama Pedagogy, Experiential Learning, Socialization of Young Children, Process Drama

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, with the support of national policies, Chinese drama education is in an important period of development. In 2015, the General Office of the State Council of China issued Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Aesthetic Education in the New Era - to enhance school aesthetic education, requiring that the construction of school aesthetic education courses should take art courses as the main body, and all disciplines should be infiltrated and integrated with each other. Pay attention to the study of basic knowledge of aesthetic education, enhance the comprehensiveness of curriculum and strengthen the links of practical activities. [1] In 2020, the Ministry of Education issued the Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools in the New Era, a document that mentions strengthening the integration of aesthetic education with moral education, intellectual education, physical education and labor education. Vigorously carry out interdisciplinary education and extra-curricular-out-of-school practical activities with aesthetic education. These documents

pointed out the direction of development for drama education in China, and the main purposes and the methods of teaching, research and practice for Chinese drama educator. [2] Aesthetic education is the core of the Chinese drama and theatre education system. According to Dr. Dong Jian and Dr. Ma Junshan, professors of Nanjing University, "Among all the arts, drama is the closest art to people, and drama education is the most convenient and appropriate education of humanistic quality." [3] With the support of national policies, the government vigorously develops interdisciplinary education and extracurricular practical activities based on the theme of aesthetic education. Aesthetic education, especially for those that integrate drama pedagogy with interdisciplinary, has become a new choice for the future development of Chinese teachers.

## 2. Chinese Drama Education: Introduction to Experiential Reading

In 2015, Xu Jun, associate professor of Shanghai Theatre Academy, her started the 'experiential reading and drama

education' project with the support of Shanghai Education Commission (this project was supported by the Shanghai Drama Alliance for Students). The project was part of the MoU on aesthetic education reforms in schools between the Ministry of Education and Shanghai, which was one of the first cities to sign the MoU. Supported by the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, the experiential reading and drama education project is an integral part of aesthetic education at Shanghai schools. It explores the inheritance of traditional and folk cultures as well as the drama curriculum in primary schools, including China Art Museum's The Jade Hairpin, an experiential reading drama adapted from Kunqu opera, Hunter Guolie, an experiential reading drama created in collaboration with Save the Children UK for migrant children in Shanghai, the classroom drama Hunter Guolie workshop, and Traveling with Little Shoes and Pangmei's Shop, [4] experiential dramas adapted from books published by the China Children's Press & Publication Group. [5].

The experiential reading and drama education project has been exploring the path of innovative drama education in the context of aesthetic education since 2015. The project is based on experiential learning, which is invented by an American educator David Kolb. "Experiential learning", a children-centered learning approach, which starts from teaching purpose, through defined teaching design to create a scene that is appropriate for the teaching content and raising students' emotional experience. The "Experiential reading" project aims

to promote students' active-learning and critical thinking skills, enhance their aesthetic abilities, improve their social skills and establish positive attitude to their study lives. [2].

Experiential reading used the principles of drama pedagogy. Scenario setting, role-playing, teacher entering the role, and open-ended question are the four main elements of this principle that integrate into the textual reading. These can build on a student's ability of imagination, creativity, communication, collaboration, problem-solving and athletics, help them understand the world and other people, and improve their overall personality development. Through simulating and imagining textual situations, they can enhance their ability to solve complex problems and gradually develop critical thinking. In an experiment on the impact of educational drama on core competencies for lifelong learning conducted by the EU-supported DICE (Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competences in Education) project, tests of the "native language communication" and "learning to learn" competencies demonstrated the significance of the educational drama application in education. The project adopted a control variables approach. The experimental group was a group of students who regularly participated in educational drama activities, and the control group was a group of students who shared as many external characteristics as possible with the experimental group. In ideal conditions, the only difference in the control group was that the control group did not participate in educational drama activities. [6].

**Table 1.** Comparison of the scores of students in the control group and the experimental group on the core competency "native language communication".

Scale	Typical questions in the scale	Average score of drama participants	Average score of non-drama participants	Differences	Significance
Reading and comprehension (self-assessment)	"I can easily understand the contents of the school textbooks." "I like to read." "I can understand the metaphors and symbols." "For me, it's easy to read the newspaper."	3.8459	3.6352	4.215%	P<0.001

**Table 2.** Comparison of the scores of students in the control and experimental groups on the core competency "learning to learn".

Scale	Typical questions in the scale	Average score of drama participants	Average score of non-drama participants	Differences	Significance
Creativity (self-assessment)	"Using my imagination is important to me." "Staying creative is important to me (e.g. doing experiments, working in different ways)." "The classes I take are fun."	3.6045	3.2586	6.9%	P<0.000
Love school life	"I like going to school." "My teachers know the best way to teach me."	3.2968	3.1713	2.51%	P<0.000
Self-perception in school	"It is measured on a scale of 1-10, 10 representing feeling very well most of the time in school and 1 representing feeling bad most of the time in school."	7.21	6.91	6%	P<0.000

The data from the table of core competencies "communication in the native language" and "learning to learn" showed significant differences in the scores of students who regularly participated in educational drama and those who did not. (Tables 1 and 2).

Li Su, an associate researcher at the Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, mentioned that self-learning and active thinking are significant expressions of human subjectivity and are important motivations for

children's growth. Experiential reading aims to promote students' self-learning and active thinking skills, enhance their interpersonal skills, establish correct social and ethical values, and maintain a positive and optimistic attitude in life by using drama pedagogy and the theory of experiential learning. This study is meaningful for the healthy development of every student in the Chinese educational system, and it is valuable for developing and preserving competitive human resources for the country.

### 3. Rights and Protection of Children (Regulations for the Protection of Experiential Reading)

The protection of children's rights is the primary principle in experiential reading drama pedagogy. Everyone should ensure the safety and health of children when conducting dramatic activities, which includes the protection of their physical, emotional and psychological health and safety. In 1924, the Assembly of the League of Nations adopted the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which was the first international document advocating the protection of children's rights. In order to provide better protection of children's rights around the world, the Women's International Democratic Federation designated June 1 of each year as International Children's Day in 1949. A decade after, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Right of the Child in 1959, which enhanced the rights and position of children. In 1989, the United Nations General Assembly formally adopted the first international convention to emphasize the rights of children called the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is the first convention mentioned that each national government should take responsibility for the growth and development of children and provide higher protection of children's rights through explicit government regulations. In 2002, the United Nations General Assembly held the first conference devoted to children's issues and adopted the document A World Fit for Children. Overall, the rights of children have been hugely improved and further clarified with years of legal protection and ongoing international efforts.

China has raised awareness for the protection of children's rights since the beginning of the People's Republic of China. On 23 December 1949, the Chinese government stipulated that China's Children's Day unified with International Children's Day. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China, adopted at the Fifth Session of the Fifth National People's Congress on 4 December 1982 (and the subsequent Amendments to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China adopted at several National People's Congresses), clearly states that "Citizens of the People's Republic of China have the right and duty to receive an education. The government shall foster the full development of young adults, adolescents and children in morality, intelligence and physical fitness". In order to better protect the legitimate rights and interests of children and join the international community in the protection of children's rights and interests, China signed the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child on 29 August 1990. And on 4 September 1991, the Twenty-first Session of the Standing Committee of the Seventh National People's Congress adopted the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors. The current Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors was amended in 2012 and took effect in 2013. The rights and responsibilities to protect children are given to all parts of society and the community through the

enactment of formal laws on the protection of minors. China raises the importance of the protection of minors, but also the right to education of preschool children. And in 1997, the Chinese government formulated the Opinions on the Implementation of the Ninth Five-Year Development Goals of National Early Childhood Education, which mentioned the guiding ideology, specific goals, measures and guarantees for the development of preschool education and other basic requirements. On 11 March 2018, the 13th National People's Congress clearly stated in the Amendment to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China that "Citizens of the People's Republic of China have the right and duty to receive an education. The government shall foster the full development of young adults, adolescents and children in morality, intelligence and physical fitness". The enactment of these laws and regulations has legally guaranteed the children's rights to physical and mental development and receive education in China. The protection of children's rights in China has been strongly supported by the government and is improving every day. So far, my country's legal system for the protection of children's rights has basically been established. At the same time, the Chinese government regards the publicity of children's rights protection laws as an important part of the universal legal education, which has comprehensively increased the attention of social members to the protection of children's rights, and the international awareness and legalization of children's rights protection has been significantly improved. [7].

Experiential reading drama pedagogy responds positively to the national policy of protecting children's rights and the willingness to protect children in society. Everyone who works with drama pedagogy should raise awareness of the protection of children by putting the protection of children's rights and physical and mental safety as the priority. According to the government's policy on the protection of children's rights and interests, experiential reading proposes child protection regulations for educational staff and parents, which prohibit any misconduct or potential child abuse behaviours or avoid any behaviours that may misunderstand by others when working with children.

### 4. The Basic Theory and Meaning of Socialization of Young Children

Preschool is a significant stage for the socialization of young children. Entering kindergarten is a process for young children to grow and gradually adapt to social life. The social development of young children affects all aspects of psychological development and directly influences the eventual formation of the children's personalities. [8] What is the socialization of young children? Different scholars have different views on this issue. Some scholars believe that early childhood's socialization refers to the development of moral awareness, moral emotions, moral will, and moral feelings in young children. Other scholars believe that the socialization of young children refers to the development of sociality in

preschoolers, which means a preschool child will gradually learn various social norms, acquire many social interaction skills through participating in social life, and grow into a mature person who can live in society. [9] Therefore, kindergarten is an important placement in developing the socialization of young children, where they can learn the skills, norms, morals and emotions of society.

The socialization of young children is the main issue of social education in kindergartens. There are four main views for the basic theories of young children's socialization. The first theory is the unification theory, which believes that the individual and society are unified in the socialization of young children. It also thinks moral concepts and collective consciousness are taught through the socialization and individualization of young children, which maintains the unity and diversity of society. [5] The unification theory promotes that teacher play a collective role in regulating inappropriate behaviors in the classroom through extensive consultation with young children's and parents' choices, so that young children can develop socialization in a cooperative environment. The second theory is conflict theory, which believes that the socialization process of young children is full of contradictions and conflicts. The relationship between teachers and young children is dominant and controlled, and teachers always stay in the dominant position over young children. Conflict theory is mainly focused on the collective education of young children compared to others. The third theory is the interaction theory, which believes that the socialization process of young children is dominated by

interactions between them. There are three modes of interaction in this theory: postfigurative culture, in which young children learn from their elders such as teachers and parents; cofigurative culture, in which young children learn from their peers; and prefigurative culture, in which elders such as teachers and parents learn from young children. Based on interaction theory, teachers should use two-way communication when educating young children and give positive responses to young children through observation. The fourth theory is the subjectivity theory, which suggests that the process of socialization should focus on the subject status and self-awareness of young children. Teachers can design the class content by including students' interests as the starting point in order to provide socialization education for young children.

Preschool learning is a significant period in delivering socialization of young children, as their learning of socialization has a positive impact on their future. The family education that the young children receive from their parents before they enter kindergarten will develop their basic life skills, individual independence and differences. Once they enter kindergarten, they begin to receive social education, and the kindergarten's unique educational environment provides beneficial conditions for young children to learn socialization. Young children will learn essential skills they need for future society, interpersonal relationships, and moral development. All of these skills can help young children transfer from immature people to social beings, and they also have a positive influence on their future learning and life development.

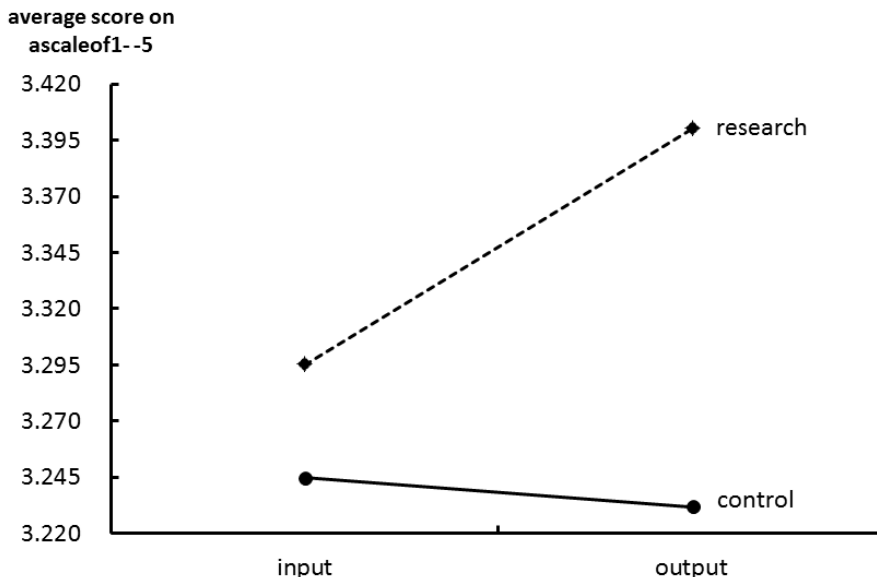


Figure 1. Variance scale of self-rated scores of the effect of educational drama on creativity.

## 5. From Picture Book to Process Drama: The Main Dramatic Play Design and Educational Application of “Pangmei’s Shop”

Drama-in-education is a teaching method that applies

drama elements to education and teaching. Drama is used as a means and method to achieve the educational purpose of imparting knowledge and cultivating skills. As a kind of drama teaching method, process drama is that teachers take drama as a teaching means, create a relaxed and pleasant teaching atmosphere, improve learners' learning motivation, and urge learners to use the generated teaching resources to perform impromptu. [10] In educational drama activities,

children have many options and chances to ask open-ended questions as being a participant or a character. Children need to enrich the framework established by drama activities through their imagination, which provides an opportunity for children's creativity. [11] In terms of creativity, the scores on the creativity scale table showed a significant upward trend in the scores of the experimental group that regularly participated in educational drama, and the scores of the control group showed a slow downward trend. (Figure 1) The application of educational drama can stimulate and promote the creativity and imagination of young children.

"Pangmei's Shop" is a picture book of experiential reading, it also used as a text book of primary school students for mandarin learning, and it should consider the significance of socialization education and social interaction for young children when the workshop designs the book. Play is one of the most important activities in children's childhood and plays a significant role in their problem solving and creative development. Early educators considered play as a way for young children to learn, and the preschool period is a time for young children to transfer from immature children to social beings, so play plays a key role in the social interaction activities of children. At the same time, the Kindergarten Education Guideline (for trial KEG in China) also clearly pointed out that "to enable preschool children to initially feel and love the beauty in the environment, life and art." The role of teachers is mainly to lead and stimulate preschool children to feel the beauty, express the beauty of interest, enrich their aesthetic experience, and experience the joy of free expression and creativity. [12] Overall, there are three main dramatic play designs for preschool children.

The first type of dramatic play is symbolic play, and it is the play activity in which children express real-life things by imagining and pretending to be in a situation. That is the most typical form of play for preschool children. Children under three often show symbols of actions during symbolic play, and role-playing usually appears around the age of three. Children above the age of four can act in symbolic play with others. The primary audience of Pangmei's Shop is 3-4 years old preschoolers. Children can pretend they are in Pangmei's store and Pangmei is selling glorious things, and other animals are coming to buy them. In the warm-up game, an imitation game is designed in which each child first imagines an animal in their mind and then pretends to be that animal. During the symbolic play, children can handle all situations themselves and talk and walk like an animal. Through this pretend play, children can express their knowledge and experience of the world around them and improve their ability of observation and imagination. Children must learn how to use and control their bodies in order to be able to express their thoughts and feelings easily and openly. [13].

The second type of dramatic play is role-playing play. Role-playing is a play in which children creatively reflect the life around them by playing roles with imitation and imagination. [14] The role-playing play has a close relationship with sociodramatic play. Sociodramatic play refers to using both language and actions in the performance

when two or more children engage in role-playing. This has become the leading activity for children aged 3-6. [15] Imitation and pretending are two essential components of sociodramatic play. In imitation, children imitate people's actions and language based on their knowledge and understanding of the real world. When environmental factors limit their imitation, they can recreate situations and activities through pretending and imagination. The founder of perceptual phenomenology, Helo Ponti, stated that "true knowledge and understanding are not from scientific observation and explanation, but a certain tacit apprehension of bodily action." [16] According to the play design of Pangmei's Shop, children need to play the roles of Pangmei and other animals and communicate with each other during the imitation and pretending to role-play. This sociodramatic play plays a crucial role in the coordination of the social roles of young children. At the beginning of the play, teachers should provide children with the materials they need to create the environment. Therefore, teachers need to prepare role-playing props for children in the play of Pangmei's Shop, such as animal hair bands, items sold in Pangmei's store, and some decorative items. The children can choose the roles they want to play and improve their cognitive development and language skills while playing. During the play process, children need to act according to the role they play in order to follow the direction of the plot. Furthermore, teachers should guide children to explore the play actively. The interaction and communication with other peers are conducive to children's understanding of social norms and expectations for each character, which assist children's social development.

The third type of dramatic play is the design of thematic activities. The whole workshop should be designed around one theme for each dramatic play since all the actions of the children's role-playing are subordinated to that theme. The theme of Pangmei's Shop is sharing. Items sold in Pangmei's store are used, but they all have special meanings and memories. She decided to share her treasures with other animals for free by selling them. All the games are designed around the theme of sharing. Children often do not share their own items and rarely take the initiative role of sharing them with other children. Many children are selfish and do not know how to share with others since their parents always provide the best thing for them. In addition, children like to collect things, and they do not want to throw away even the small items they do not use. If they share the things that they do not use with others who need them, the item does not go to waste, and they also feel the happiness of sharing. Dramatic play can guide children to learn how to share with their friends through interaction with other children and realize that other children may have different views and attitudes than themselves. The play will also promote children's positive emotions and let children realize that sharing with others is a meaningful thing.

The main educational application audience for Pangmei's Shop is 3-4 years old preschool children. The curriculum is mainly divided into four lessons, and each lesson is 15 minutes. Guiding children to experience the happiness of

sharing with others through role-playing is the key to the teaching process, so they can realize the importance of sharing and learn how to share with their friends. The main purpose of Pangmei's play is to help Pangmei share her meaningful items with someone who needs it. Drama can make students aware that people have different ways of expressing and receiving issues, topics and themes due to its performative and interdisciplinary nature. [17] Dramatic play props are the main preparation for teaching, including fermented bean curd, ice skates, rocks, cat hair bands, drawing papers, coloured pencils, etc. The following is the lesson plan design for the course:

Lesson 1: Introduce the theme.

- (1) Warm-up game: Ask all children to make a circle. Take turns imitating their favorite animals and wait until other children get the answer right.
- (2) Contextualization: Ask all children to walk randomly in the classroom. Introduce Pangmei's store to children while they are walking.
- (3) Single performance: The teacher tells the children what is in Pangmei's store. The children will act out the items that the teacher says. For example, the teacher can say there are flowers in Pangmei's store, and all children will act out the flowers at the same time. Lead the children to act out items that the teacher says.
- (4) Group performance: The teacher tells the children what is in Pangmei's store. Children will work in groups to act out the items that the teacher says. For example, if the teacher says there is an airplane in Pangmei's store, children will gather together and act out a huge airplane.

Lesson 2: Introducing the situation of play.

- (1) Teacher enters the role: The teacher plays the role of Pang Mei and introduces the significance of her store and the items she sells. The teacher can say, "Hi, kids, I am Pang Mei. I love to collect things, and I have many old things in my room. My mom told me to throw away these useless things, but they are all my treasures. I have a good idea. I want to open a shop to sell my treasures to people who need them. So, my store is open....."
- (2) Role-play: Teachers can ask children to put on the animal hair bands to act like animals and to make a purchase in Pangmei's store. They can tell children the touching little story between Pangmei and her items during the role-playing.

Lesson 3: Guided exploration.

- (1) Drawing: The teacher asks children to draw several of their treasure items on a large piece of paper. Each child will introduce and share a story of items they drew after they finish.
- (2) Improvisation: Each child can open their own store. Tell the children to decorate their own store with props and set their treasure items as merchandise. Ask other children to pick their favorite items from different stores.

Lesson 4: End the action.

- (1) Free discussion: The teacher asks the children to name

the most impressive item they bought today and how they feel after another child bought their item.

- (2) Paper airplanes: Give each child a piece of colored paper and ask them to write or draw their feelings about the day on the paper. Once they finish, ask them to make paper airplanes and let them throw them in the classroom. Each child will pick up a random paper airplane and share the contents of the paper airplane with the class.

Teaching reflections and suggestions: Teachers need to ensure and drive up the children's emotions during the warm-up games. The symbolic imitation play guides children to imitate animals openly and boldly while the rest of the children should watch them. Encourage and help shy children to speak up in the classroom and share the story of their treasure items during the role play. Make sure to let some overly active children listen quietly to other children's stories. It is important to pay attention to the children's verbal communication with their peers and persistence in the role-play. Teachers should provide proactive guidance for children that do not have these characteristics in the play activity. In the final discussion, children will share the story of items that are meaningful to them. For example, the small pillow they sleep with every night, the small wooden sword made by their grandfather, and the toy from a friend. They will understand the importance of everyone's items and experience the happiness of sharing with others.

## 6. Conclusion

Play is a major part of preschool education for young children and plays an important role in problem solving and creative processes. The process of play is also a learning process for young children. The process of gamified role-playing and experiencing life context is a way for young children to gain life experience and guide their thinking, imagination and observation. Through the different themes of dramatic play, children are allowed to develop positive natural and social emotions on the basis of real experiences in life context.

Drama education plays a more and more important role in today's society. Through the application of dramatic play in preschool education, children can actively recognize and understand things in social life, learn knowledge, and improve the development of their ability of thinking, imagination, language ability and creativity, so that they can better adapt to future social life, learn social rules and promote their positive emotions. In the future application of preschool education, dramatic play will also play a greater role. It will focus on enhancing emotions and morals for young children and promoting the overall development of children's moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetics. Chinese drama pedagogy is receiving attention in early childhood education. Applying drama pedagogy to preschool education is becoming a new choice for Chinese preschool teachers to face the future.

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