

Drama in Education for a Junior Kindergarten Class on the Historical Figures and Heritage of Guangfu: An Action Research from the Child's Standpoint

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Abstract: Drama in education (DIE) brings artistic and educational aims together and holds a distinctive place in early childhood education. This study takes the child's standpoint as its guiding idea and draws on the historical figures and heritage of the Guangfu region as its cultural material. Working with 25 children in a junior class at Kindergarten A in Guangzhou, and using observation, interviews and action research, the study ran two rounds of DIE activities. The findings show that DIE in kindergartens currently suffers from gaps in teacher training, a shortage of teaching resources, difficulty in bringing local culture into drama, and thin cultural knowledge among both teachers and children. Designing DIE activities from the child's standpoint calls for well aimed objectives, engaging content, deliberate organization and workable evaluation. The two rounds raised the children's knowledge of Guangfu historical figures along with their capacity for imitation and performance. The study recommends sharper targeting of objectives, more engaging content, more purposeful organization and more effective evaluation, and offers practical reference and theoretical grounding for handing Guangfu culture on within early childhood education.

1. Introduction

Sustained national attention to early childhood education has driven rapid growth in drama-in-education (DIE) activities in kindergartens. From 2010 onwards China saw a wave of DIE activity modelled on approaches such as "creative drama" and "process drama" from Europe and North America. After 2015, the indigenous "growth drama" model gradually took shape; this model moved the localization of DIE a long way forward. In 2022 the Compulsory Education Curriculum Scheme and Curriculum Standards placed drama within the compulsory arts curriculum for the first time and explicitly required drama teaching adapted to different age stages. The Guide to Learning and Development for Children Aged 3 to 6 likewise states that children in the junior class should "like listening to music and watching performances such as dance and drama." Read together, these policy documents show how much weight the state attaches to bringing drama and education together[1].

The Guangfu region, steeped in Chinese traditional culture, has produced countless figures and master craftsmen whose deeds carry considerable educational value and a strong sense of national spirit. Zhang Zhensun, Li Suiqiu, Liang Yaoshu, Chen Zizhuang and Chen Tiquan left their mark in defending the country, serving the people, and practising filial devotion and care, and they give concentrated expression to the spiritual culture of the region. Bringing these figures and their legacy into DIE allows the culture and spirit carried in their stories to be re-enacted in a relaxed and enjoyable dramatic setting. It plants in young children a readiness to carry that spirit forward and to identify with traditional culture, and it lays a foundation on which cultural identity can later be built[2].

In practice, though, most DIE work in kindergartens stays within the single form of stage performance. It has not grown into a curriculum system and lacks both an overall curriculum design and any mechanism for evaluation. On the side of teacher expertise, class teachers tend to run DIE activities on the basis of their own understanding, with no shared and well grounded view of what the objectives are, so goals drift and aesthetic and moral education go missing. On the side of content, current kindergarten DIE leans heavily on picture books, and the performance amounts to little more than a copy of the story, with scant invention or flexibility. How DIE might be properly embedded in kindergarten practice, and in particular how it might be joined to local culture, is still underexamined. This study therefore focuses on that junction. Starting from what junior class children need, and weaving in the everyday customs of the Guangfu region along with the children's own experience, it designs a DIE activity series on the historical figures and heritage of Guangfu to support the handing on of Guangfu culture and the national spirit[3].

2. Research design

2.1 Participants

2.1.1 Selecting the kindergarten

Kindergarten A sits in Yuexiu District, Guangzhou. Founded in 1954, it holds provincial grade one status and is a municipal demonstration kindergarten. Its stated purpose is "everything for the children," and its educational thinking covers character as the root, science to open the mind, sport to build the body, art to shape the spirit, and labour to nourish the heart. The kindergarten has developed its own aesthetic education curriculum and growth curriculum. Since 2015 it has been building DIE courses with a Guangfu character, designing different forms of DIE for the junior, middle and senior classes, and inviting DIE specialists such as Zhang Jinmei and Wang Tianqiang in to train and advise staff[4]. A monthly open DIE lesson strengthens class teachers' ability to run such activities, and an annual drama culture festival gives children a chance to perform on stage. Because the researcher's internship was placed there, the study used Kindergarten A as its site, which helped secure both the completeness and the usefulness of the work.

2.1.2 Selecting the class

Kindergarten A has six junior classes, each with 25 children, two class teachers and one caregiver. At the point the study began, the children of Junior Class 5 had been in the kindergarten for only a month. They were comparatively ready to follow their teachers, and some were local Guangzhou children with a deeper grasp of Guangfu culture and more willingness to take it in, which gave the study a workable starting point[5]. The researcher had also spent the first internship month with that class, had got on well with the children and come to know them, and had formed an initial picture of their learning and their level of understanding, which made both implementation and data

collection easier. The study therefore took all the children of Junior Class 5 as participants. Without disturbing ordinary class teaching, the researcher observed and recorded the class performance area, the DIE props and the DIE activities already running, and once the age characteristics and developmental level of the children were broadly established, put the Guangfu figures and heritage series into practice[6].

2.1.3 Participating teachers

To support implementation, the study interviewed four junior grade teachers (see Table 1) in order to establish how DIE currently works at Kindergarten A. During the action research itself the researcher worked with the two class teachers of Junior Class 5 to draw up the plan for the activity "Much Gained from Helping Others." After the first round, unstructured interviews were used to gather the teachers' comments and suggestions, and the plan was revised accordingly before the second round[7]. The four teachers interviewed and the two class teachers of Junior Class 5 all had substantial experience of running DIE, had taken classes of different ages onto the stage of the kindergarten's drama culture festival, and had years of teaching research behind them. Their involvement gave the study sturdy backing.

Table 1. Background of the participating teachers

Teacher	Gender	Age	Education	Years teaching	DIE teaching profile
T1	Female	26	Bachelor's	5	Lively and young, with several years of DIE teaching experience; degree in early childhood education; has organized DIE a number of times and taken work to the drama culture festival stage
T2	Female	33	Master's	7	Joined in 2018; has taught DIE with junior classes; has taken part in the kindergarten's open DIE lesson discussions many times; experienced
T3	Female	24	Bachelor's	1	Undergraduate thesis on DIE; fairly substantial research experience in DIE; has joined other teachers at the drama culture festival
T4	Female	30	Master's	7	Joined in 2018; several years of DIE teaching experience; has repeatedly taken part in the kindergarten's open DIE lesson seminars and in teaching skills competitions

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Interviews

The study used formal and informal interviews side by side. Formal interviews were held with members of the kindergarten's management and with several head teachers, using an interview outline adapted from earlier research on the design of DIE activities. Conducted before the action research, they covered how DIE is currently used at Kindergarten A, what teachers understand DIE to be and how they feel about it, and what the teaching actually achieves[8].

During the action research, informal interviews picked up the head and assistant teachers' views and suggestions on the draft plans as they arose. After the action research, interviews were used again to collect the class teachers' feedback, and the researcher worked with them to revise and improve the plans. Approaching the design from several angles and in several formats made the final version of the activity plan considerably richer.

2.2.2 Observation

Participant observation was used to record the children's behaviour and their language during the activities. A purpose built observation sheet logged the course of each session in detail and captured what the children did and how they responded emotionally, giving the researcher material to work from when revising the plans[9].

Non-participant observation was used alongside it to record the kindergarten's teaching facilities and the DIE activities already in place, and documentary material was analysed to examine how the children behaved and how the teachers taught[10]. This made it possible to describe the state of DIE implementation at Kindergarten A and the support actually available, and gave the design of the activity plans a basis in the situation as it stood.

2.2.3 Action research

The study taught DIE in a junior class at Kindergarten A in Guangzhou, negotiating and working with the head and assistant teachers to design and revise the activity plans together. The action research ran on a "design, adjust, refine" logic. A complete series of themed activities was designed before implementation; during implementation the sessions were videoed and the recordings kept; after implementation written records were made of how the children actually performed and of overall evaluations of each lesson. Because the study was concerned above all with improving the design, the researcher worked jointly with the class teachers throughout and took their advice, refining the plan by reading the children's performance in the light of what the teachers suggested[11].

3. The state of drama in education at Kindergarten A

3.1 Fewer public reports, and less drive behind curriculum building

Teacher T1 put it this way: "We used to have a drama performance every semester. Now, to get more variety into the curriculum themes, we've fixed drama for the second half of the year." With so many school based curriculum themes in play, DIE courses and activities at Kindergarten A get squeezed and end up colliding with other priorities, and they give way. A count of posts on the kindergarten's public account shows 27 items relating to DIE in 2018 to 2020, 34 in 2021 to 2023, and only 5 in 2024 to 2025, a clear downward trend. As the share of DIE within the school based curriculum shrinks, its development in the kindergarten has come to a standstill[12]. See Table 2.

Table 2. Public account posts on school based curriculum themes at Kindergarten A, by period

Curriculum type	2018 to 2020	2021 to 2023	2024 to 2025
Drama in education	27	34	5
Child initiated play	28	26	9
Aesthetic education	1	32	10

3.2 A narrow range of props and a thinly built environment

DIE at Kindergarten A takes place in a shared drama room, on the auditorium stage, and in the performance corner of each classroom. The drama room is on the top floor of the junior class building. It is large but bare inside, and its props, mostly culturally marked headgear and costumes for the lion and dragon dances, are scattered about the corners. The junior class performance corners mostly sit by the washroom doors and, short of space, have only a single clothes rack to mark the area, which does little to draw the children in (see Table 3). Teacher T2 said: "We have a

storeroom on the ninth floor, kept for things we've made ourselves or that classes have used, props and costumes, and we keep them all sorted there." Sharing drama props across the whole kindergarten tends to set one class's needs against another's, and neither is properly met[13].

Table 3. Drama in education props by area at Kindergarten A

Area	Location	Props available
Drama room	Fifth floor, teaching building	Small chairs; culturally marked props (lion dance, dragon dance); discarded large craft pieces
Auditorium stage	Fifth floor, teaching building	For performance only
Classroom performance corner	Junior, middle and senior classes	A clothes rack and a few coloured costumes
Props room	Ninth floor, administration building	Craft items such as paper clothing; a curtain; bottles and other odds and ends

3.3 Thin conditions for implementation and fragmented content

The observation records from Junior Class 5 show that DIE for the junior classes is currently mixed in with class management and routine training. Much of it comes in the form of games, and because the timing and the formats are piecemeal, one drama game does not connect to the next. Children get the fun of playing without meeting what DIE is actually for. The building up of other school based curricula has squeezed the conditions needed to run the DIE curriculum: programmes, space and props have all dwindled, and implementation is caught in a loop that feeds on itself[14].

3.4 Flat storylines and difficulty in integrating culture at any depth

Teacher T1 said: "For the junior class it's Cantonese nursery rhymes, that's how we do Guangfu culture. There's the Ode to the Lychee, sampan congee, morning tea, barbecued pork buns, Cantonese sweet soups, Cantonese soups, Cantonese herbal tea." She also pointed out the difficulty: "There really are problems in the integration, because if you try to put Guangfu things into drama there's no narrative conflict, so it isn't interesting enough." Teacher T3 made a similar point: "Turning the features and characteristics of Guangfu culture into something children can take in, whether through words or through plot, is honestly quite hard." The culture runs deep and the stories are flat, and neither does much to hold a young child's attention[15].

3.5 Regional limits and shallow cultural knowledge among teachers and children

Teacher T3 noted: "Not every child actually speaks Cantonese, and these nursery rhymes have to be sung, every child has to sing, so the ones who don't speak it can only be taught it over and over." Teacher T4 said: "Some of us teachers learnt it later on. I learnt Cantonese later on." Most of the teachers at the kindergarten come from other parts of the country and know relatively little about Guangfu culture, which makes it hard for them to connect with what is most worth carrying in the culture when they design DIE, and hard to seize the teaching moment once the activity is under way.

4. Design framework for the Guangfu figures and heritage series

4.1 Putting the child at the centre: designing the objectives

The objectives rest on three kinds of grounds: policy, theory and the problems identified. The policy grounds are the requirements for junior class children set out in the Kindergarten Education Guidance Outline and the Guide to Learning and Development for Children Aged 3 to 6. The theoretical grounds come from Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, which divides objectives into the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains[16]. The problem-based grounds come from the objectives set out in Zhang Jinmei's Expression, Creation, Performance: A Drama Education Curriculum for Kindergartens (Junior Class).

The overall objectives were designed along those three dimensions. In the cognitive domain, children come to a first knowledge of the historical figures and heritage of Guangfu and sense how much the culture holds. In the affective domain, they develop admiration for those figures and experience the pleasure of helping others. In the psychomotor domain, they use bodily movement for simple role imitation and dramatic expression[17]. Under the umbrella theme sit four sub-themes: "Perpetuation of filial piety," "Endurance of cultural heritage," "Sustenance of the aspiration to serve the people," and "Promotion of patriotism." They run in sequence, so that the national spirit embodied in the Guangfu figures is conveyed step by step. See Figure 1.

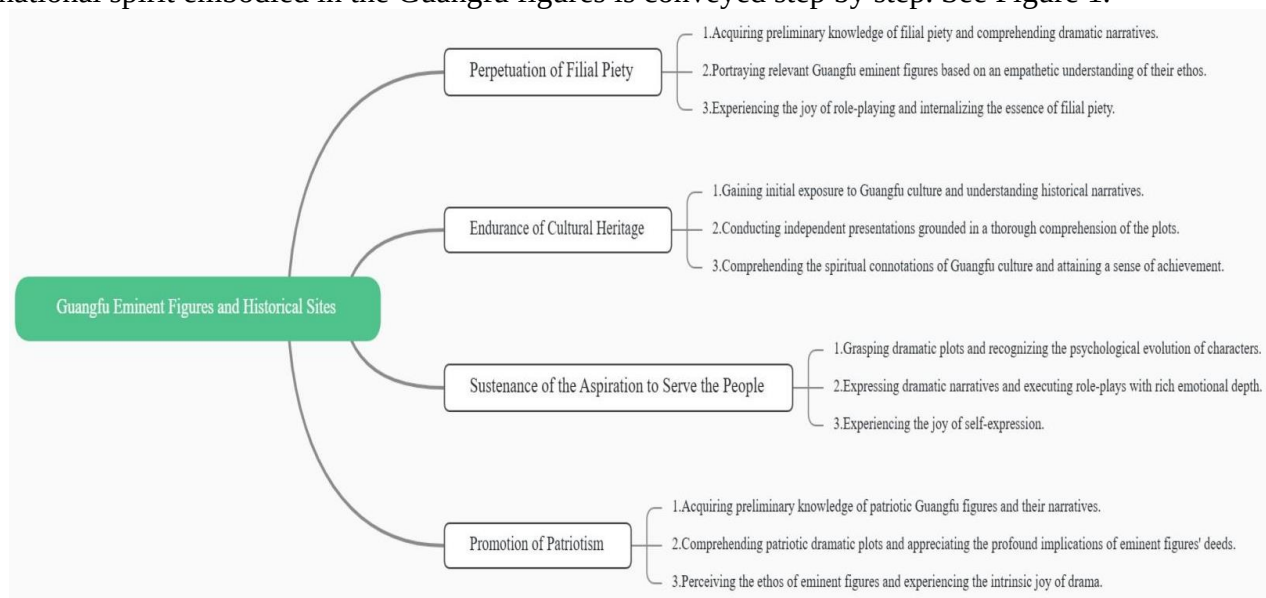


Figure 1. Objectives by theme

4.2 Bringing in the children's own lives: choosing content

Content was chosen according to three principles: suitability, educational value, and plot. The first round took the story of Chen Tiquan practising medicine to save lives from the picture book Children Tell of Lingnan: Famous Figures One by One, simplifying it to match what junior class children can understand and what they have lived through, and adding cultural detail from everyday Guangfu life, local legends, buildings, food. The second round adapted this further, bringing in the working roles of doctor and nurse and centring the story on Chen Tiquan's skill as a physician.

4.3 Extending what children know: organizing and running the activities

The first round used three DIE conventions: clue materials, role play, and freeze on the beat, in which movement stops when the music stops. Freeze on the beat served as the main convention. The second round used two: role play and teacher in role. The sequence of the sessions follows the four stages of Zhang Jinmei's drama workshop: warm-up, role shaping, plot creation, and sharing and communication.

4.4 Respecting what children do: evaluating the activities

Evaluation followed four principles: objectivity, a developmental orientation, comprehensiveness, and attention to difference. Those involved in evaluating were the researcher, the class teachers, members of the kindergarten's management, parents, and specialists in early childhood education. Evaluation covered the activity plan, the process of implementation, and the outcomes. Methods combined diagnostic, formative and summative evaluation[18].

5. Implementing the Guangfu figures and heritage series

5.1 Round one: the "Much Gained from Helping Others" activity

5.1.1 Designing to the children's level: introducing the figure

Round one took the story of Chen Tiquan practising medicine to save lives and cast Chen as a fine young "Doctor Xiaoquan," driving the plot forward through a search for the medicinal ingredients he needs. The objectives were these: cognitive, to come to a first understanding of what helping others means and to follow the dramatic plot; skill, to carry out a sequence of treating the patient actions in response to clues; affective, to feel the pleasure that helping brings and to enjoy the activity[19].

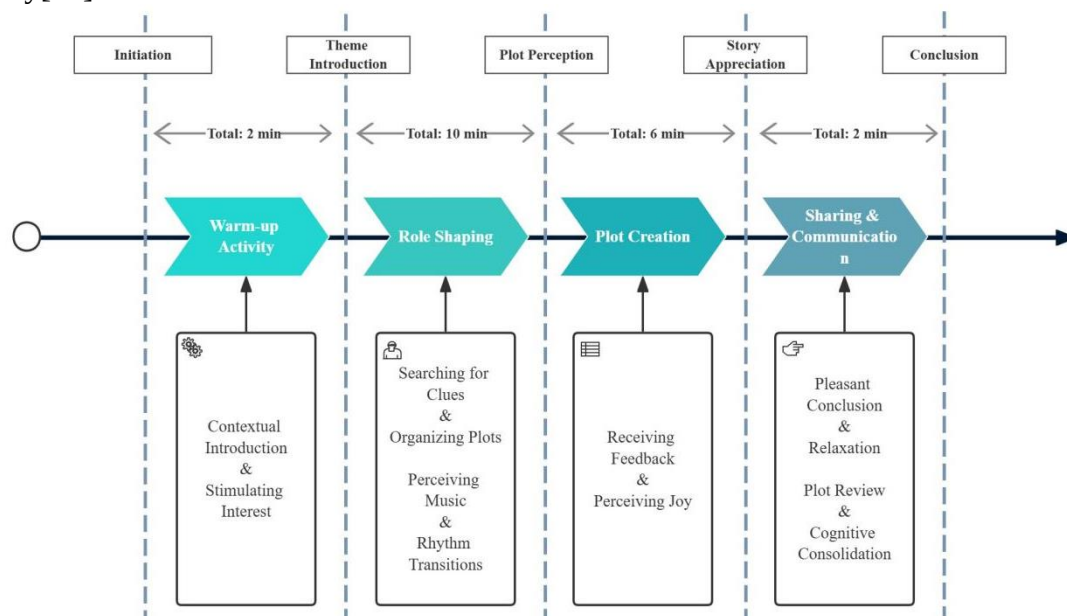


Figure 2. Activity sequence in round one of the "Much Gained from Helping Others" activity

The sequence ran as follows. In the warm-up, teacher and children interacted to bring the story in. Role building had two parts, "hunting for clues, working out the plot" and "feeling the music,

changing the beat," and wove bodily movement into the freeze on the beat convention. Plot creation used the episode of the missing gift to carry the story to its climax. In sharing and communication the teacher summed up the plot and introduced Chen Tiquan's Chen Li Ji medical hall. See Figure 2.

5.1.2 Working from the children's experience: coming to know the figure

In the warm-up the teacher drew on the fact that children in the class had been away from kindergarten to get them thinking, and used open questions to push that thinking further. In role shaping most of the children followed the teacher around the room looking for clues, and the strand of "helping the teacher" carried them deeper into what helping others feels like. In plot creation the children were strongly drawn to the gift. The gift made their sense of achievement visible and gave them a direct experience of helping. In sharing and communication, conversation between teacher and children quickly lifted their emotional engagement and deepened their feel for the roles.

5.1.3 Judging by what the children felt: recognizing the figure

Round one left several problems. The form of the activity sat loosely against Guangfu culture: the session was made up largely of repeated walking and running at varying speeds and never showed what was distinctive about Doctor Xiaoquan's work. The organization did not treat the children as agents, since the teacher drove the plot from beginning to end and the children did little more than run along. The content did not convey the culture in full, because the process attended so closely to organizational form that the point of the content was lost.

5.2 Round two: the "I Too Can Help Others" activity

5.2.1 Adjusting to what the children experienced: exploring the heritage

Round two reworked the original picture book story, bringing in the jobs of doctor and nurse and putting the weight of the plot on Chen Tiquan's skill as a physician. The objectives were revised: cognitive, to follow the story and to recognize what the characters are like; skill, to use simple movements to imitate the sequence of treating a patient; affective, to feel the pleasure that helping brings and to enjoy the activity[20].

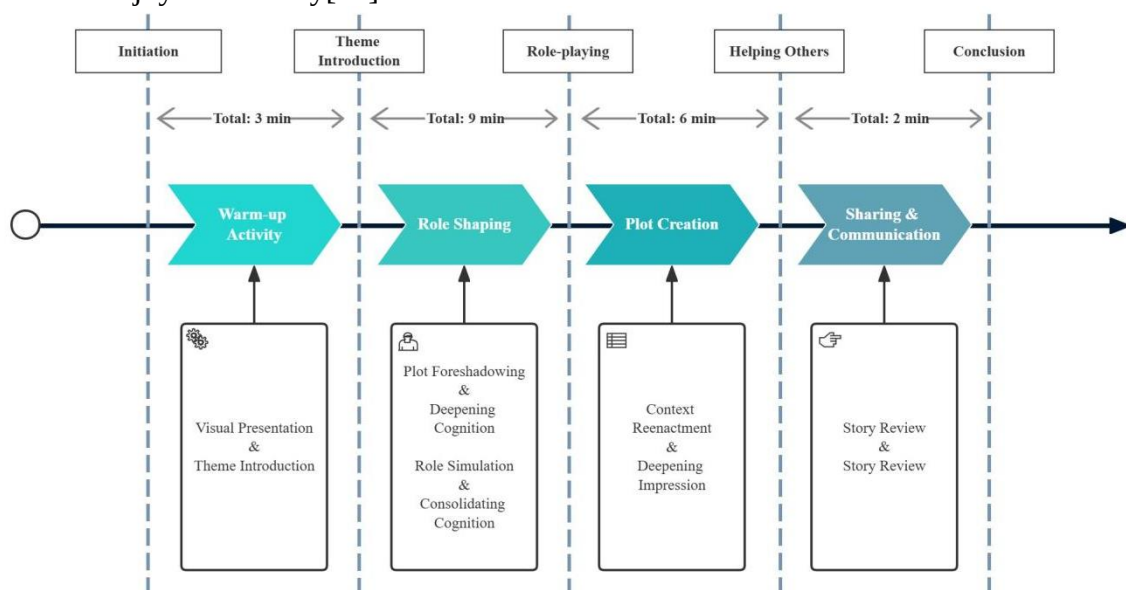


Figure 3. Activity sequence in round two of the "Much Gained from Helping Others" activity

The plan gave priority to showing the children as agents, extending the story through behaviour they produced themselves. The warm-up came in through a mirror game. Role building had two parts, "laying out the plot, deepening knowledge" and "trying on roles, consolidating knowledge." Plot creation built its point of conflict around an open day at the medical hall. Sharing and reflection was led by the teacher, who summed up and evaluated. See Figure 3.

5.2.2 Following the children's own ideas: taking in the heritage

In the warm-up most children were able to draw on their own experience and follow the teacher through the mirror game. In role shaping the teacher used a slide presentation to show medical items and images of doctors and nurses, then invited the children to take the parts of doctor, nurse and patient in turn. In plot creation the teacher handed the initiative back to the children and let them perform whichever role they liked. In sharing and communication the teacher praised and affirmed what the children had done to help others and encouraged them to keep on with it.

5.2.3 Judging by what the children took from it: feeling the heritage

Round two still had problems. The range of character types in the story was too narrow, with repeated performances circling around doctors and nurses treating patients, and the children grew tired of it. The teacher's handling of role play lacked precision, overlooking what junior class children have actually lived through and leading them into movements they did not know. The transitions between phases were unimaginative, the joins between segments abrupt, and the children grew restless.

5.3 What the implementation produced

5.3.1 Effects

The two rounds raised the children's knowledge of Guangfu historical figures. They came to a first understanding of the story of Chen Tiquan answering an emergency call, had a fairly full experience of it, and grew more familiar with the Chen Li Ji medical hall. Relations between teachers and children warmed, the children's trust in the teacher strengthened, and their participation rose steadily. Their ability to imitate and to express improved, and through repeated imitation and role taking the beginnings of cultural identity took shape. The researcher's own professional capacity grew across the two rounds, with a deepening command of the various DIE conventions.

5.3.2 Problems

First, the content was too hard and the children struggled to get into it. In round one the story ran beyond what they could understand; in round two episodes such as performing an operation had no connection to their lives. Second, cultural integration stayed weak and cultural identity with it. Both rounds showed a low degree of integration: when the activities ended the children could recall little beyond Chen Tiquan's name and where his medical hall was, and they had only a vague notion of what he stood for. Third, the design was dull and the phases inflexible. Both rounds repeated the same design, the joins between phases stayed stiff, and the children's attention wandered.

5.3.3 Why the problems arose

Inadequate teacher capacity and a lack of practical experience come first. The researcher had not yet managed to fold the distinctive Guangfu culture properly into the running of DIE activities and was still working at the level of a novice teacher. Shortfalls in props and equipment, and limited

teaching support, matter too. Both rounds took place in the Junior Class 5 classroom, and the lack of space restricted what the children could do physically; DIE props were not opened up to the intern, so the teacher's own props or multimedia slides were the only demonstration available. The children's own thin knowledge and weak comprehension also play a part. They had been in the kindergarten only two months and were still settling into their surroundings, which made it hard for them to give their attention over to the teacher.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

Designing DIE on the Guangfu figures and heritage from the child's standpoint means, first, finding out where the children come from and talking with class teachers about how much they currently know of Guangfu culture. Second, it means giving full weight to the children's zone of proximal development and building role play around the ordinary knowledge of seeing a doctor that they already have. Third, it means choosing a dramatic story that fits, folding in the Guangfu customs children meet most often, and creating some atmosphere. Last, it means attending to what the children actually need and catching the educational moments that come up in the daily routine.

On the side of implementation, the teacher in role convention should lead children into the story situation first; the freeze on the beat convention then brings in a story with Guangfu character; role play, joined to bodily expression and spoken response, presents the figures' stories; and throughout, the suitability of the content needs to be kept in view so that children can build the dramatic situation for themselves.

6.2 Recommendations

6.2.1 Aim the objectives more precisely and bring in more of Guangfu culture

The cognitive objectives can be sharpened by breaking the plots of the figures' stories down, drawing out their core meaning and working on it directly. Skill objectives need to be set against the level of motor development junior class children have reached, so that their practical understanding is taken in rather than merely shown. Affective objectives should watch the shifts in children's feeling and mood during the activity, using healthy and positive story content to move them towards a genuine sense of what it is like to help someone.

6.2.2 Make the content more engaging and thicken its cultural substance

Teachers need first to get close to the core spirit of what each figure did, and to use a wider variety of conventions in running the activities. Second, they can split each story into three strands, the culture of daily life, the spiritual culture shared more widely, and the figure's own spirit, so that the meaning of the story is spelled out in more detail. Last, they need to watch for what holds the children's interest and adjust the plan while the activity is running, bringing the spirit of other groups of characters into the story alongside its central spirit and so enlarging what the story can teach.

6.2.3 Organize more deliberately and build a fuller cultural setting

Different dramatic conventions can be used to thread the episodes together and tighten the plot, and a fuller repertoire of conventions will do more to keep children interested. It would also help if kindergartens gave more of the physical environment over to Guangfu culture, furnishing the

performance corners and the drama room with sticker pictures, drawings and models of Guangfu figures, so that the setting itself reinforces what children know and remember of them.

6.2.4 Make evaluation work better and attend to the value of the dramatic process

In method, formative and summative evaluation need to be properly combined, with close observation and recording of how children's feelings and emotions shift. As to who evaluates, children should be the principal evaluators and teachers their support, with spoken interviews or everyday conversation used to learn what children make of the activity. As to results, evaluation should take several directions and several angles, setting the children's actual responses beside the candid feedback of teachers.

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