

The Bridge Between Students and Professions: Drama in Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore how Drama in Education in China can help students to develop their profession. 'Drama in Education (DiE) first originated in Britain in the 1960s', and it is 'a theatrical art form of a pedagogical nature'. DiE uses drama as means and methods to achieve the educational aims of imparting knowledge and developing skills. This form of education developed in China in the late 20th century. In order to adapt to Chinese situation, scholars have studied and adapted it and put it into practice in drama workshops and courses. Huizhu Sun developed a new form of performance studies in China, 1999, known as social performance studies. 'It includes Drama in Education, and professional training'. The paper therefore tries to explore the role of DiE as a bridge: connecting students to professions and exploring their creativity and possibilities in terms of this part. I will base on a study of DiE at eduwings kindergarten in Haidian District, Beijing, and focus mainly on a six-person drama programme. Part One explores the reasons for and need for professional development in DiE. Part Two goes on to use the theoretical research of Huizhu Sun to support the argument, analyse the cases and methods shown in social performance studies and explain how it has been applied with a simplified approach in eduwings kindergarten. In the final part of the essay, I claim that there are still obstacles to the creation of the bridge and analyse it in terms of some social roles.

Keywords: Drama in Education, DiE, social performance studies

1. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to explore how Drama in Education in China can help students to develop their profession. 'Drama in Education (DiE) first originated in Britain in the 1960s',¹ and it is 'a theatrical art form of a pedagogical nature'.² DiE uses drama as means and methods to achieve the educational aims of imparting knowledge and developing skills. This form of education developed in China in the late 20th century. In order to adapt to Chinese situation, scholars have studied and adapted it and put it into practice in drama workshops and courses. Huizhu Sun developed a new form of performance studies in China, 1999, known as social performance studies. 'It includes Drama in Education, and professional training'.³ The paper therefore tries to explore the role of DiE as a bridge: connecting students to professions and exploring their creativity and possibilities in terms of this part. I will base on a study of DiE at eduwings kindergarten in Haidian District, Beijing, and focus mainly on a six-person drama programme. Part One explores the reasons for and need for professional development in DiE. Part Two goes on to use the theoretical research of Huizhu Sun to support the argument, analyse the cases and methods shown in social performance studies and explain how it has been applied with a simplified approach in eduwings kindergarten. In the final part of the essay, I claim that there are still obstacles to the creation of the bridge and analyse it in terms of some social roles.

2. Body

I was invited to give courses on DiE at an international kindergarten in Haidian District, Beijing in April 2021. Six girls aged 5 to 6 years participated in the courses. It is different from previous ones, parents expressed their desire during our communication that they would like this course to help their children learn something about

their future professions. So, I started trying to find the suitable training to help these six students. I realised during the preparation of the course and in the communication with the parents that most of them have decent careers, as lawyers or teachers, etc. I realised in preparing the course and in communicating with the parents that most of them had decent careers, such as lawyers or teachers. Two parents wanted their children to pursue the same career as themselves in the future, and the rest enrolled their children in various interest courses in order to learn a wide range of skills and to be more competitive in the workplace. Therefore, the expectations of the parents were what prompted the combination of DiE and profession. Many of the current factors in China also make it important to explore professional development in DiE. Firstly, 'China has been in the process of economic growth and the development of online media since 1992',⁴ which has led to the emergence of professions such as streamers, radio presenters and cybersports players. They usually need a more dramatic expression in front of the camera. Secondly, China is in the era of COVID-19 since December 2019. On the one hand, the epidemic has led to layoffs at many large companies, such as Tencent and bilibili. On the other hand, many people are working from home, and staff need to be more competitive, communicative and articulate. However, 'in the context of examination-based education in China',⁵ many students do well in written examinations but have poor communication and social skills. Thirdly, parents have increasingly high expectations of their children. Taking Year 4 Class 3 of Beijing Tiantongyuan Primary School as an example, 80% of the forty children's parents arranged a variety of interest courses for their children during the weekend. The purpose is to make the child more competitive in the workplace. These show that 'social inequalities and fierce competition are social realities in modern China'.⁶ But DiE, as an aspect of social performance studies, can be linked to another branch of it, professional training. The urgent need for the training approach can be achieved through some of the practices of DiE.

According to the theory of social performance studies by Huizhu Sun, this kind of performance is 'an under-stage, under-theatre act, and it will have an impact on a specific audience'. It means that it focuses less on forming a dramatic character but more on the social situation. 'The study aims to contribute to many new developments in China, such as academic, social or professional development'.⁷ For example, DiE in China currently uses games or plays to develop good character qualities in children, such as cooperation and communication skills. I claim that this is a fundamental part of exploring professional development in DiE. However, parents may not want their children to waste too much time in drama courses due to the heavy academic load, so purposeful training becomes very crucial. Huizhu Sun, in social performance studies, illustrates a vocational training approach to simulated situations. This is a practice of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 'in order to train police officers with the ability to read people, catch them and even kill them, they hire professional actors who are similar to movie stunt doubles, to play the bad guys and train the trainees using the closest virtual means to the real thing'.⁸ This is obviously more serious and realistic than the trainees playing cops and prisoners to each other. Another method is dance-based emotional exercises. Two graduate students from the Shanghai Theatre Academy (STA), Chenguang Gan and Yongsheng Liu, used the "Rasa dance Training" in order to make the staff of the Merry-Rendezvous Hotel in Shanghai more pleasant to serve guests. They draw on Schechner's Rasaboxes exercise, which is 'a direct expression of emotion'.⁹ 'Gan and Liu have designed two series of dance movements that produce two positive emotions, happy (sringara) and brave (vira), rhythmically guided by musical backgrounds'.¹⁰ This approach uses physical movements to initiate a real emotional experience. The hotel staff can face customers with a more positive mood and attitude by practising it constantly. However, as this DiE programme is for kindergarten children, I have simplified the above practical approach. As with the training offered by STA, our drama courses begin with basic exercises such as 'breathing, emotional exercises and verbal expression'.¹¹ To make the course more adaptable for six children, I tried to make it more interesting. Fang believes that 'the aesthetic nature of drama is that it is a form of communal experience, contemplation and exchange of feelings'.¹² Therefore, the course is based on the drama story 'Animal Employment Agency'.¹³ The story cleverly relates the characteristics of animals to various human professions, such as lobsters as tailors and frogs as swimming instructors. The six girls need to do some movements with music under my guidance. The reality was that they didn't know what to do, only Nini wished she was a teacher, but there was no such animal figure in the script. So I made the exercises flexible by using upbeat music to get the children in a positive state, similar to 'Rasa dance Training', and then asked them to try to find their favorite animal to imitate, such as a kangaroo courier or a puppy cop, and Nini created a character by herself, the rabbit teacher. Heggstad holds that 'Drama in Education should be about co-creating experiences and knowledge in a group'.¹⁴ The aim of this training is to allow the children to explore interesting professions and to develop an awareness of different ones. After four drama sessions, when the children were no longer shy about expressing themselves and could relax and engage enthusiastically in various drama exercises, I started to use simulated situations. It wasn't as difficult as the FBI's, but started with stories they were familiar with, such as the occupations of their parents, the environment in which they usually attended classes, etc. I started by listening to the stories the children wanted to tell, such as a mother who is a lawyer or a teacher who teach German. Then I wanted them to be free to collaborate and act out the story. They can use any items in the

classroom as props and have some rehearsal time. If they needed it, I would have joined in. In fact, I was involved in the story “The teacher who teaches German” in which I played the part of a disobedient schoolgirl and Douzi played the teacher. I hope this course plays on the things that ‘young people are good at: the joy of playing and the ability to imagine’¹⁵. The whole atmosphere was relaxed, I was like a friend and the children enjoyed themselves. The rehearsals also are an enhancement of cooperation and communication skills, which are beneficial for any kind of work in society. As the girls are still too young, basic knowledge and fun training is the goal of the courses. After three months of the courses, half of the children had new ideas or understanding for professions that interested them more. The other three girls had no ideas, but their communication and cooperation skills had been developed.

However, there are currently different perceptions of DiE among various social roles in China, resulting in barriers to the development of an approach that has a clear training purpose in DiE. Firstly, scholars disagree on the focus of DiE. Xu claims that ‘DiE is not exactly drama. Drama is a performing art, whereas DiE contains non-performative elements that can stand on their own’.¹⁶ Wang, however, has a different view. She believes that ‘if students do not show drama, it is impossible to judge and ensure the quality and effectiveness of teaching’.¹⁷ There is a Chinese term called “qilisigan”, which stands for the elements needed in performance creation, that is, observation, attention, imagination, feeling, thinking, expression, creativity, aesthetics, humour, rhythm and image. Most of the courses simply explore the students’ ‘qilisigan’, with the content focusing on drama rather than training and application. In my opinion, drama is only a means to assist in the acquisition of skills and knowledge but is not the goal. Secondly, many parents in China are not aware of DiE, ‘thinking of it essentially as actor training or performance rehearsal’.¹⁸ I taught drama courses at Beijing Tiantongyuan School in 2019 and the purpose of the parents was that the students could complete a performance at the end of the year. I chose the script *A Fantasy Travel*, it contains poems by ancient Chinese poets, and rituals. Many students learned knowledge, communication skills and rituals after the performance, which gave some parents a new idea of the possibilities of DiE. Thirdly, ‘DiE as projects of some companies, its mission is to make money and the efficacy of education becomes weak’.¹⁹ Some companies may utilise the same games and scripts repeatedly, rather than targeting programmes to students. The focus is on the results presented at the expense of the process that is significant in DiE. Therefore, the lack of popularity of DiE in China has created a misunderstanding and misuse of it by some social roles. Courses that focus on rehearsals and shows are also rewarding for the children but lack purpose.

3. Conclusion

In light of the above, the essay shows how professional development is explored in Drama in Education. I base my analysis primarily on a six-person drama class at eduwings kindergarten. I considered the reasons why there is an urgent need to explore professional directions with DiE in China nowadays and practiced some adaptations of the drama courses based mainly on Huizhu Sun’s theory. Then I discuss the different views of some scholars on the focus of DiE, and the factors that hinder its development, parents and companies. After the three-month drama courses, I think it is a limitation that it is too early for children at kindergarten level to take drama courses on professional aspects. I have only provided some basic guided practices. However, I believe that the professional training in DiE could be better applied to students at the junior and senior levels. ‘China has seen a rapid growth of DiE in universities since the late nineties. Chinese students are currently good at receiving theoretical knowledge, but weak in practical aspects’.²⁰ To integrate well into society after graduation, they must acquire some professional skills. At present, some secondary schools in Beijing and Shanghai have added DiE courses to their student schedules as experimental ones, and some topic-specific DiE workshops are gradually increasing. We need to seize this opportunity to train our students so that they can make a better transition from the student to the social model.

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