BRILL

BEIJING INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF EDUCATION
3 (2021) 579–590

Beijing International Review of Education
brill.com/bire

Growing Drama: A New Integral Paradigm through Children's Drama Experience Construction in Early Childhood

Jinmei ZHANG
Professor of Early Childhood Department, School of Education, Beijing Normal University, Zhuhai, China
zhangjinmei71@vip.sina.com

Abstract

Traditional drama education in early childhood has been concentrated on the interdisciplinary level, barely integrating children's mind, body, and spirit. Language, science, society, health and art are integrated through drama to establish connections among the various disciplines. However, it is very important for children to walk between the worlds of reality and fiction through drama, interact with body and mind, and construct a complete experience. To achieve maximum integration of body and mind that is based on "education as growth" as in Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938), Growing Drama, a new integrated paradigm, maintains that the drama education of young children drama follow their drama experience construction.

Keywords

integral drama based pedagogy – body and mind – growing drama – children's drama experience – growing environmental theatre

1 Introduction

Integral Education holds that the division between body and mind must be overcome (see Gonçalves-Silva, et al., 2016). Aurobindo Ghosh as an advocate of Integral Education in India thought that "the child is essentially a soul with a body, life, energy and mind. He needs to be developed integrally and

© KONINKLIJKE BRILL NV, LEIDEN, 2021 | DOI:10.1163/25902539-03040006

harmoniously" (Babu, 2013, p.1239). Accordingly, the goal, content, method, and evaluation of education should lead to the maximum integration of body, mind, and spirit. "Integral Education has become a distinguishing characteristic of twenty-first century higher education due to increasing interest in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies in general, and consciousness studies in particular." (Ma & Subbiondo, 2021, p. XX).

John Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938) provides a solid theoretical basis for drama education. In the early twentieth century, "Learning by doing" became the Progressivists' educational catchphrase, to be echoed throughout this century by the drama teacher's version of it" (Bolton, 1984, p. 9). It emphasized that "activity" and "environment" were important to the child's learning. However, according to Dewey, the idea of "education as growth" had not been fully exploited in drama education – that is the focus of Growing Drama.

The goal of Growing Drama, as a new integrated paradigm, means that young children's drama education should follow young children's drama experience construction, promoting an organic growth of "role-plot-discourse" in a continuous transformation between a real and a fictional situation. Children make drama by themselves in the construction of growing environmental theatre (see Zhang, 2017).

2 Growing Drama: Towards an Integral Education of the Interaction between Body and Mind

The interaction of body and mind is the highest pursuit of Integral Education, and it is also the cornerstone and goal of Growing Drama. Integral Education has entered into the interaction of body, mind, and spirit from a more narrow interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary integration. Growing Drama can be more expansive in that, driven by the innate nature of drama, a child's body and mind wander in real and fictional situations by experiencing, expressing, and creating in order to reach dialogue and blending.

As an advocate of Integral Education in India, Aurobindo thought that "the child is essentially a soul with a body, life, energy and mind. He needs to be developed integrally and harmoniously." (Babu, 2013, p.1239) Accordingly, the goal, content, method, and evaluation of education should pursue a maximum integration of body, mind, and spirit: "The educational goals and attitudes, begun in the kindergarten and continued with increasing emphasis and complexity in each progressive section, are meant to engender in the child an awareness of the world through observation, creative expression and exploration, an

appreciation of beauty in all its forms, and a development of the powers of the mind comprehension, expression, reasoning, concentration, independent and original thinking, assimilation, selection and judgement " (Babu, 2013, p. 1240).

In the context of drama education, mobilizing spiritual experience and imagination, and using external body expression, children observe, think, and understand the world around them. This is also the pursuit of the integration of body and mind in Growing Drama.

2.1 *Cognition and Expression by Body and Mind: the Basis of Growing Drama*

Young children's specific, perceptual, intuitive and delicate knowledge is from the body perception, with the body's vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch as the media, constructing the direct experience of the external world to form the embodied mind. French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, a representative of body philosophy, believes that the body is me for children, and I am the body. Through the body, we can perceive the world and connect with the world (Shu, 2015, p. 29).

In children's pre-language period between 0–2 years, an infant's expressions and body movements are usually the ways that an infant expresses hunger, cold, heat, separation anxiety, and other needs.

> Through facial expressions, such as frowning and smiling, crying and limb movements, they show that they are hungry or full, sick or comfortable, happy or painful, disgusted or angry. In addition, the infant's emotional and physiological perception schema is instinctive, which is a fixed congenital feature in the development of race. In the language period, even with the development of language, young children are still willing to express themselves with their bodies, shaking their bodies with music, making faces, speaking with gestures and so on (MENG, 1987, P. 126).

Embodiment in Performative Pedagogies means "the experiential body is both a representation of self (a 'text') as well as a mode of creation in progress (a 'tool') … In addition, embodiment is a state that is contingent upon the environment and the context of the body" （ Perry & Medina, 2011, p. 63). For young children at 18–24 months of age, the first pretend play appears that is "the act of pretending," pretending to do something with body action, but actually not realizing to play as others or roles. Greta Fein (1984) showed four levels of children between the ages of 2 and 4 years, "self in pretend activities" was linked as level 1, such as "I am pretending to teach my dolls" (Lesley & Toon, 2001, p. 11).

Children's thought is reflected through the action of pretending, at the same time the thought accompanying with pretending action is constantly deepened, so that the body and mind are integrated closely.

In pretend play, the "pretending" state of young children's body and mind becomes the basis of Growth Drama; and it reflects and meets the needs of a child's pretending with body and mind.

2.2 *Body and Mind Wandering between Reality and Fiction: the Condition of Growing Drama*

Young children's feelings and expressions through body and mind not only occur in the real space; but they also occur at any time in a kind of fictional space, as children wander between the reality and fiction. In one moment, they enter into a fictional situation, playing a role, and going through something; in another moment, they return to reality. This is normal for young children, and it is an indispensable condition for Growing Drama.

Sue Jennings (see 1998 & 2013) as a specialist in Neuro-Dramatic-Play, provided the progression of dramatic play: "Embodiment—Projection—Role. Embodiment 0–13 months, when everything is experienced through the body and the senses. Projection 13 months–3 years, when toys and art media beyond the body are explored. Role 3–7 years, when roles and stories are developed in dramatic form, verbally and non-verbally." She adds, "The child being able to enter the world of imagination and symbol, the world of ritualistic and dramatic play and drama" (2015, p. 42). In the imaginary and fictional world, children's bodies and minds are in a state of safety and self-sufficiency. At the same time, children switch between the fictional world and the real world with "pretend self" and "real self" (Lesley & Toon, 2001, p. 26), although the boundary of switching is sometimes not so clear. "For example, in the socio-dramatic play, pretend self engages in typical activities, e.g. cooking, looking after baby, making tea, going to bed etc. For real self, I am cooking, I am changing the nappy, I am pouring tea, etc." (Lesley & Toon, 2001, p. 27).

Real self in the real world has the body action and expression of individual life; pretend self in the fictional world has the body action and expression of role. For example, the ant crawls on the ground quickly and uses its antennae to find odor, and the snail crouches on the ground slowly. When the pretended situation is no longer needed, children naturally get rid of their role identity, and return to their real selves. When the body goes from reality to fiction, the sprout of drama takes place. We can definitely say that drama grows in children's body and mind, a growing process that is from the inside-out.

3 Growing Drama: Organic Construction of Children's Drama Experience in Integral Drama-Based Pedagogy

Dewey's *Experience and Education* provides a solid theoretical basis for drama education. In the beginning of the twentieth century, "Learning by doing" became the Progressivists' educational catchphrase, to be echoed throughout this century by a drama teacher's version of it: "drama is doing" (Bolton, 1984, p. 9). It emphasized that "activity" and "environment" were important in a child's learning. However, in Dewey's *Experience and Education*, the idea of "education as growth" has not been fully exploited in traditional drama education, but it is in Integral Drama Based Pedagogy and in Growing Drama.

3.1 *The Primary Condition of Growth is Immaturity*

"But the prefix "im" of the word immaturity' means something positive, not a mere void or lack. … immaturity means possibility of growth" (Dewey, [1916] 2016, p. 40). We can find the immature state of drama sprouting from the pretend play of children aged 18–24 months. Just like in a 2-year-old girl's personal pretend play of "catch a plane," it is through her own eyes that she observes her father's hurried appearance in going to the airport; and firsthand at the same time, has all kinds of body experiences. With her body leaning forward, she wears her father's hat on her head, bag on her shoulder, and a big and a small bag on her arm, shaking and shaking, which makes her body change, and she is catching the flight looking like her father (Zhang, 2019, p. 75).

Although the germination of children's drama is immature, it contains the power of growth. The pretending of action can gradually develop into the pretending of role and the creation of plot. Without the reference of a story script, and by the demonstration and guidance of adults, children are driven by the possibility of their internal growth. This enables young children to transform their existing experience into physical action through internal processes of imitation and imagination.

3.2 *Growth is a Process from the Inside to the Outside Based on the Innate and the Instinctive, Not the External*

As Dewey noted, "Growth is not something done to them; it is something they do…The fact of dependence is accompanied by growth in ability, … suggests that it is already something constructive." (2016, P. 41). He added, "The thoroughgoing character of this helplessness suggests, however, some compensating power" (2016, p. 42). Dewey recognized, "The specific adaptability of an immature creature for growth constitutes his plasticity. …this means power to modify action on the basis of the results of prior experiences, the power

to develop disposition." (2016, p. 43) In the development from pretend play, role play to dramatic play, young children develop from action pretending, role pretending to more complex plot pretending through constant reorganizing or reconstruction of experience. This process shows the inherent "compensating power," and children develop a certain drama ability.

However, by taking the script first, then the teacher's guidance as the center, and finally showing on the framed stage, traditional children's drama education adheres to the routine of adult's rehearsal. It relies too much on "external forces" and ignores the internal growth power of children. Growing drama is not training from the outside to the inside, but natural growth from the inside to the outside. Young children understand the nature of drama, from the level of play to the level of drama art with audience consciousness.

3.3 *The Plasticity of Growth is Not that Children Passively Adapt to the Environment but that Children Actively Interact with the Environment.*

According to Dewey, "Adaptation, in fine, is quite as much adaptation of the environment to our own activities as of our activities to the environment" (2016, p. 46). Growing Drama regards this environment as a child's imaginary and fictional time and space, as well as the atmosphere in this time and space, or it is a kind of situation. Children will actively construct a certain fictional environment to provide external conditions for the growth of drama experience through impromptu dress up, pretended actions and language, background music that triggers imagination, and scenes built in construction play.

3.4 *Children's Growth has its Own Unique Significance*

Dewey maintained that "Normal child and normal adult alike, are engaged in growing. The difference between them is not the difference between growth and no growth, but between the modes of growth appropriate to different conditions. … we may say the child should be growing in manhood. … we may say that the adult should be growing in childlikeness" (2016, pp. 48–49). Because of this, the childishness of children's drama is also a beauty, and it cannot be expected to be as mature as an adult's drama.

3.4.1 Growth of "Role-Plot"

"Role-first" means following the rules of children's drama experience construction, the body in pretending action produces the role in the fictional situation, and then the plot is produced by the characteristics of the role and the interaction between the roles. "Generic role transformation" was linked as level 2, such as "I am a doctor looking after my patients." (see Fein 1984, and Hendy & Toon 2001, p.11) The child plays the role of the doctor first, and thus produces

the plot about the doctor taking care of the patient that arises at the historic moment. As Anton Franks contends, "In drama lessons, the resources used to construct an improvised drama text are held in the body. Bodies, holding and representing patterns of speech and behaviour, make up the text itself through interaction in space and time. In improvised drama, students select roles and shape the interaction into scenes" (1996, p. 105).

In terms of plot creation, Growing Drama no longer pays attention to the original story text, but returns to the origin of role interaction. When a character enters a specific situation, the conflicts arise from the focus between the characters, and the conflicts are solved in a certain atmosphere. The reproduction of the series of processes is the creation of the plot. Under the guidance of teachers, the plot branches from the tender buds of the roles are growing, interweaving and extending constantly.

3.4.2 Growth of "Role-Plot-Dialogue"

Growing Drama regards role dialogue as a growing process, which makes children have no burden of memory and recitation. The growth of role dialogue is also based on the continuous development of roles and plots in specific situations.

From the perspective of supporting children's role experience, the growth of dialogue depends on "teacher in role." The dialogue of children's role is not produced through the teacher's demonstration, but the response by the teacher's participation in the play. According to the degree of children's role experience, teachers choose a certain type of role which children's experience is relatively weak.

From the perspective of promoting the development of plot conflict, the growth of dialogue depends on the "hot-seating" between the roles. The strategy of "hot-seating " focuses on a unique situation of conflict, which seems to be a discussion of the plot as a role, and sometimes it can be interpreted as improvisation. As a result, the growing process of drama experience of "role—plot—dialogue" breaks the traditional routine of "script-first", placing "plot" and "dialogue" behind "role" exploration, and promotes the development of plot and dialogue through the physical and mental interaction of the role.

4 The application of Growing Drama Paradigm in Kindergarten—an Example of Drama Theme "*Guenille*" for 5–6 Years Old Class

Through five semesters of action research, the application of Growing Drama paradigm in kindergarten adopts the dual track parallel of "drama theme activities" and "Growing Environment Theatre." Under the paradigm of "Growing

Drama," this study went beyond the framed stage in an exploration of a kind of theatre that belongs to children, "Growing Environment Theatre," a performance space that is open, pluralistic, and accompanied by a concurrent construction of drama theme activities (Zhang, 2018, pp. 45–68).

The environmental theatre under the Growing Drama paradigm is a growing theatre, which can also be called "Growing Environment Theatre". It is not pre-set by teachers. With the support of teachers, children try to construct, operate, maintain, and modify themselves in various spaces of kindergarten in the process of role, plot, and discourse growth.

The proposal of Growing Environment Theater is developed from the work of Rachard Schechner, the proponent of postmodern drama at New York University. As early as the 1960s, Schechner created a postmodern theatre form—"environment drama". He provided six axioms for environmental theater (see 1967, revised 1987): "(1) The theatrical event is a set of related transactions. (2) All the space is used for the performance. (3) The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in "found apace". (4) Focus is flexible and variable.(5) All production elements speaks their own language. (6) The text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production. There may be no verbal text at all" (Schechner 1994, p. xix).

The introduction, expression, creation, and performance of drama theme activities are all around the exploration of practical experience with drama theme, and they are combined with the construction and operation of Growing Environment Theatre in the early, middle, and late stages. The first three links of drama theme activities are mainly guided by teachers, in the form of collective teaching, which is generally carried out in the classroom; the Environmental Theater is dominated by preschool children, with teachers giving certain support at the appropriate time, and in the form of group activities, which can be carried out inside or outside the classroom.

Taking the drama theme "*Guenille*" for 5–6 years old class as an example, (Zhang, 2019, p 79–81) the drama topic is about how a father and his children face a lonely green freak, how to get his trust and help, and how to make him feel the warmth of helping others. The practical experiences involved are: driving outings and family picnics, forest exploration, avoiding storms, seeking help from strangers, and so on.

4.1 *Role Exploration / Space Discovery and Creation in the Early Stage of theater*

After the introduction of the activity to enjoy the picture book "Guenille", the children in the 5–6 years old class explore the relationship between the children and their father, pet dog, and the clothing, food, housing, and transportation of

the lonely green freak Guenille in the drama expression activities, from which the empty imagination of family, picnic, Guenille's cabin and other situations gradually enrich the exploration of the role. At the same time, in the early stage of the construction of the Growing Environment Theatre, the teacher and the children in the class discuss what scenes we need to initially form, and where it is suitable to make these scenes. For example, there are four scenes in *Guenille*, including parking lot, picnic area, river, and Guenille's home. They are mainly constructed on the outdoor lawn, and use tires, large toys, trees and other existing materials. Only Guenille's home can be seen in the classroom read area or role area. In the early stage of the scene, the children freely combine scenes, choose the one they are interested in, dress up as a role, and begin to try the interaction between the roles.

4.2 *Role Perfection and Plot Creation / Space Enrichment and Transformation in the Middle Stage of Theater*

In the drama creation activities, the children impromptu play dad, children, and pet dog lost because of the heavy rain. In the cold and hungry situation, they have to try every means to persuade Guenille in the cabin to help them; while the lonely Guenille highlights from his body movements and expression that he can help others and feel the power of love from not helping others and not giving love. In contrast, Guenille 's life experience is relatively unfamiliar to the children, and this "authoritative" role is initially played by teachers; after the children have accumulated relevant experience, they can boldly try to play this role. At the same time, in the Growing Environment Theater, teachers and young children constantly enrich and transform the layout, installation and acting materials of each scene, and timely replace the worn-out materials to make clear the signs of the scene. The children enter into the increasingly rich mid-term theater scene, constantly improve the personality of the role: children are timid or brave, father is careful or careless, Guenille is neat or messy, etc., and focus on a conflict, explain different solutions, and finally form a relatively consistent idea.

4.3 *Rich Dialogue / Space Refinement and Flow in the Late Stage of Theater*

Compared with the expression of body, it is difficult for young children to achieve a very ideal state in the vividness, richness and fluency of voice and speech expression. Growth drama relies on "role growth" and "plot growth" for "dialogue growth". The words spoken in the roles played by preschool children do not require them to recite the scripts and lines. As long as they are in a certain situation, in the interaction with other roles, and in the process of

creating dramatic plots by solving dramatic conflicts, they can naturally flow out bit by bit. At the same time, from the aesthetic point of view, the growth environment theater should increase or decrease the device details and play materials, ensure its firmness, and refine the scene description. Through the "story map" strategy, it should clear the flow path of several scenes, draw out the blank space between each scene, and supplement and improve it in the real world. In the aesthetic late stage theater, the dialogue between the characters is vivid, the words are more rich, and the emotions are more delicate. For example, this quiet Guenille is afraid of noise, and is not used to many people at home. Finally, he lets the father and his family in, but left the cabin by himself. During the impromptu performance of the dialogue, the children uttered some interesting words such as "thirty miles away", "the fallen chicken", "making money" and "the gift of the future". For details, please refer to the following transcription:

> Guenille: Why do you have to come to my house?
> Brother: Because there is only your house in the forest.
> Guenille: There's another one thirty miles away.
> Brother: Ah, when we get there, we would turn into a fallen flower chicken!
> Guenille: (laughter): It's a drowned chicken! Don't go over the line.
> Dad: I have a way! Give you this (empty object in the palm of his hand), you can make money. I made 50000 yuan.
> Guenille: No!
> Dad: This is a gift to see the future.
> Guenille: No way!
> (Dad, brother and sister are sitting in front of Guenille 's house, and the dog is lying beside him. The brother and sister keep their hands together and beg Guenille to open the door.)
> ……
> Guenille: come on in! I'm leaving. I can't sleep because of the noise!

5 Conclusion

The interaction of body, mind, and spirit is the highest pursuit of Integral Education, and also the cornerstone and destination of Growing Drama. In certain aspects, Growing Drama has entered into body and mind interaction, different from the narrow interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary integration of traditional drama education. From the perspective of Growing Drama,

children's body and mind are driven by the innate nature of drama and wander in real and fictional situations with experience, expression, and creation, so as to reach dialogue and blending.

Young children's specific, perceptual, intuitive, and delicate knowledge is from the body perception, with the body's vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch as the media, constructing the direct experience of the external world to form the embodied mind. In pretend play, the "pretending" state of young children's body and mind becomes the basis of growth drama. On the contrary, Growth Drama reflects and meets the needs of their pretending with body and mind. When the body goes from reality to fiction, the sprout of drama takes place. We can more and more definitely say that drama grows in children's body and mind, which is a growing process from the inside-out.

Based on the idea of "education as growth" in Dewey's *Experience and Education*, Growing Drama as a new integrated paradigm. It means that young children's drama education should follow the rule of young children's drama experience construction, promoting the organic growth of "role-plot-discourse" in the continuous transformation between real and fictional situations, and making drama by children themselves in the construction of growing environmental theatre.

The application of Growing Drama paradigm in kindergarten adopts the dual track parallel of "drama theme activities" and "Growing Environment Theatre," going beyond the framed stage in an exploration of a kind of theatre that belongs to children—"Growing Environment Theatre," a performance space that is open, pluralistic, and accompanied by a concurrent construction of drama theme activities.

Growing Drama focuses on the unique rules of the construction of children's drama experience, and it meets the growth of children's drama experience through the construction of Growing Environment Theater. However, the research on how to promote children's learning quality in Growing Environment Theater needs to be further explored, including areas such as initiative, concentration, creativity and problem-solving ability.

References

Babu, S. (2013). Integral Education – A Concept of Sri Aurobindo. *Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies*, (1), pp.1239–1240.

Bolton, Gavin. (1984). *Drama as Education: an argument for placing drama at the centre of the curriculum*. Harlow, England: Longman House.

Dewey, John. (1938) *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone.

Dewey, John. ([1916] 2016). *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Educati*on. China Light Industry Press.

Franks, Anton. (1996) "Drama Education, the Body and Representation (or, the Mystery of the Missing Bodies)." *Research in Drama Education*, (1) pp.105-120.

Gonçalves-Silva, Luiza Lana, Maria Celeste Reis Fernandes de Souza, Regina Simões, and Wagner Wey Moreira. (2016). "Thoughts on Corporeality in The Context of Integral Education." *Educação em Revista*, 32(1) pp.185–207.

Fein, Greta.(1984). "The Self-building Potential of Pretend Play", in T.D. Yawkey, and A.D. Pelligrini (eds) Child's Play: Developmental and Applied. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Cited in Lesley, Hendy & Toon, Lucy. (2001). Supporting Drama and Imaginative Play in the Early Years. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Jennings, Sue. (1998). "Introduction to Drama Therapy". London: Jessica Kingsley. Cited in Jennings, Sue (2015). "The Body, the Play and the Drama". BACP Children & Young People , (9) pp. 40–43.

Jennings, Sue. (2013). "101 Activities for Managing Challenging Behaviour". Buckingham: Hinton House. Cited in Jennings, Sue. (2015). "The Body, the Play and the Drama". BACP Children & Young People , (9) pp. 40–43.

Jennings, Sue. (2015). "The Body, the Play and the Drama". *BACP Children & Young People*, (9) pp. 40–43.

Jinmei, Zhang. (2017). "The Analysis in Paradigm Development on Drama Education for Young Children in China." *Journal of Northwest Normal University*, 54 (2) (In Chinese).

Jinmei, Zhang. (2018). "Constructing Growing Environmental Theatre for Preschool Children under Growing Drama Paradigm." *Research In Drama Education & Theatre Studies*, 11 (12) (In Chinese).

Jinmei, Zhang. (2019). "Growing Drama: Organic construction of Preschool Children's Drama Experience." *Studies in Early Childhood Education*, 298 (10) (In Chinese).

Lesley, Hendy & Toon, Lucy. (2001). *Supporting drama and imaginative play in the early years*. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Ma, Liwen & Subbiondo, Joseph L. (2021). "Integral Drama Based Pedagogy as a Practice of Integral Education: Facilitating the Journey of Personal Transformation".

Meng, Zhaolan. (1987). "Why facial action can be used as an objective index of emotion research". *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, (2) pp.124–134 (In Chinese).

Perry, Mia & Medina, Carmen. (2011). "Embodiment and performance in pedagogy research: investigating the possibility of the body in curriculum experience." *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, (3) pp. 62–75.

Schechner, Richard. (1994). *Environmental Theater: An expanded New Edition including Six Axioms for Environmental Theater*. New York: Applause.

Shu, Zhu. (2015). *A Study of Infant-child Mental Genesis from the Perspective of Merleau-Ponty's Embodied Phenomenology*. Changchun: Jinlin University Doctoral Dissertation (In Chinese).