

The Use of Drama Pedagogy in Teaching Morality in a Chinese Primary School

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to explore the potential of the drama pedagogy that may contribute to primary children’s moral growth in the Chinese educational context. It argues that drama may offer an ensemble-based, dialogic, and narrative pedagogy for teaching morality to complement the didactic traditional model.

Design/Approach/Methods: The methodological approach is that of case study research, using different methods to assess the effects and effectiveness of the author’s teaching. The fieldwork was undertaken in a public primary school in Beijing, in which the drama workshop *The Boat* was taught to 16 children on a voluntary basis.

Findings: The study demonstrates that drama can be seen to some extent to assist pupils in aspects of their empathetic attitudes, dialogic thinking abilities, and autonomous thinking capacities.

Originality/Value: The author hopes the study might stimulate more and deeper research in similar contexts and that this may further extend the understanding of Chinese teachers of this resourceful new pedagogy.

Keywords

China, drama pedagogy, moral education, primary school education, story

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Since 1978, the Chinese mainland has been undergoing rapid economic and social changes, and the traditional social system has been shaken; however, a new active society with associated values such as openness, dialogue, democracy, and pluralism is still forming in the process (Qi & Tang, 2004). In such a social background, Qi and Tang (2004) believe that the politicized and authoritarian mode of teaching morality is no longer suitable for modern China. However, the fact is that moral education in schools cannot effectively help students develop ethical qualities such as freedom, self-development, and independence needed in the new era, and it has functional limitations when facing the various challenges of a transitional society. These challenges may include ethical conflicts between the past and the present, between the conservative and the radical, between local and global cultures, and so on. They go on to suggest that it is not beneficial for China to successfully transform into a mature society unless the school-based moral education faces these challenges actively, instead of following social changes in a passive way (Qi & Tang, 2004).

Similarly, Li et al. (2004) hold the view that moral education as a taught course in primary schools has often been teacher-, textbook-, and class-centered, focusing on doctrine delivery from adults' points of view and do not effectively take into account pupils' physical and affective needs. Besides, Yang (2021) argues that political education and behavioral training still hold a dominant position in contemporary moral education theory and practice, while student-, situation-, and activity-centered approaches advocated by a variety of reformers remain marginalized; accordingly, there does not appear to be any special emphasis on the development of the truly personal and creative mind. These points are also echoed by Cheung and Pan (2006), Lee and Ho (2005), and Tse (2011), among others. Therefore, challenges exist for ongoing improvement of school-based moral education in the context of the transitional Chinese society, and efforts need to be made to help future generations develop their ethical selves more effectively in a fast-changing world.

With the problems stated above, I propose that drama pedagogy may have the potential for facilitating primary children's moral learning in the Chinese context. As a physical activity, drama may provoke children's learning interests, promote their autonomous thinking abilities, and encourage them to work together as a community (Morgan & Saxton, 1987; Neelands, 2009; Nicholson, 2002). In particular, as a collaborative art form, drama's capacity in fostering integration and togetherness fits nicely with the ideology of the Chinese system as a communist country. As argued by Neelands (2002), when acting in drama "the boundaries between self and other meet and merge" and "the core of our humanity, the essence of compassion, the beginning of morality are to be found in our capacity to merge self with other" (p. 8). The emphasis on community and working together might encourage the policymakers' acceptance of drama as a new pedagogy to teaching morality in the Chinese educational context.

Drama is now being taught in some primary schools in China, especially in major urban cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. However, it is still a new and under-researched area. Particularly,

there is little research on actual classroom practice in drama. Thus, this is what I am aiming to do in my research—I want to explore how drama can complement the current curriculum for teaching morality in the Chinese context. As a trial, this paper takes the drama workshop *The Boat* as an in-depth case study to address the following question: In what ways may drama pedagogy contribute to primary children’s moral growth in the Chinese context? In answering the question, this study attempts to offer an understanding of the possibilities of using drama as an innovative pedagogy to complement school-based moral education for primary-aged children in the current educational environment.

Research on drama and moral education for children

Drama-in-Education (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) and Process Drama (O’Neill, 1995) have been introduced from the West to China as new forms of pedagogy since the late 1990s. In the Chinese context, schoolteachers and drama practitioners normally employ an embracing and mixed approach and incorporate drama/theater educational models, conventions, activities, and elements in different ways into their classrooms and call them “drama pedagogy,” which is usually portrayed as a playful, activity-based, and student-centered teaching method (Tam, 2010; Wang, 2018). According to O’Neill and Lambert (1982), “Through the pupils’ active identification with imagined roles and situations in drama, they can learn to explore issues, events and relationships. In drama, children draw on their knowledge and experience of the real world in order to create a make-believe world” (p. 11).

Rasmussen (2010) offers an analysis of different philosophies that have underpinned the traditional approach of education and improvised drama approach. According to him, the teacher-, textbook-, and class-centered mode of teaching morality in the Chinese context could be traced back to the conventional empiricist epistemology, which believes “it is possible to gain objective, generalized knowledge that corresponds with the predictable laws of the physical world” (Rasmussen, 2010, p. 531). Thus, representational truth and hierarchical communication is present in the associated education, indicating that some kind of knowledge or universal truth can be represented and transferred by an enlightened teacher to the learners who are less enlightened. On the contrary, drama educators tend to see drama approach as part of a constructivist epistemology, which is closely related to the constructivist philosophy of John Dewey. Dewey (1934) rejects the notion of knowledge as a conceptual depiction of given truth but believes knowing involves meaning construction through aesthetic experiencing and social participation. In Rasmussen’s words, the drama teacher believes that “the self, meaning and knowledge is developed under the influence of all present and interacting language, materials, environment, bodily acts, cognitive and affective representations” (Rasmussen, 2010, p. 533).

In terms of moral education for children, drama educator or practitioner rejects the cognitive developmental theories of moral education, particularly those developed by Kohlberg (1971), which can be traced back to the theories of the Swiss psychologist Piaget (1932) who was the first to offer a comprehensive theoretical framework to describe and explain the stages of moral development in terms of children's cognitive development. The emphasis on rationality and belief in the hierarchy of abstract moral instructions applicable to all people in different times and spaces is not in line with drama pedagogy. Instead, drama researcher doubts universal objectivity but rather emphasizes difference and uncertainty, believing that "morality is located in the social sphere and that particularity, context and cultural specificity are essential when attempting to understand and explain moral life" (Winston, 1999, p. 461). Three drama educators present different approaches to how drama can facilitate children's moral development—Jonathan Neelands, Brian Edmiston, and Joe Winston. The key theories and models of the three drama practitioners inform the present study in the Chinese context.

Firstly, Neelands (2009) suggests using the "ensemble-based" learning in drama to provide young people with a model of civic life by exploring the idea of how best to live and work together as interdependent human beings, in order to shape and transform their social actions not only in the drama classroom, but also beyond school in the wider community. According to Neelands, such learning enables young people to become a self-managing, self-governing, and self-regulating social group who co-create artistically and socially (Neelands, 2009). For Neelands, drama can act as a better version of the real world that celebrates the virtues of collaboration and togetherness. The language used in Neelands' writings—"community," "togetherness," "social justice," and so on—fits nicely with the discourse of Marxism, which forms the philosophical foundation for the theories of education in China. Thus, on a practical level, Neelands provides me with a vocabulary to use selectively in the context of China in terms of moral and drama education. This will be particularly reflected in the drama workshop *The Boat*, when I explore with children the concept of community and try to promote a sense of togetherness in the drama classroom.

Secondly, Edmiston (1994) adopts the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and suggests that in drama, children may discover new voices and opinions for shaping the ethical dimensions of the self, as drama can problematize and enliven the dialogue or conversation among people by contextualizing empathetic struggles over how they should act toward each other in particular situations; in this way, it can help to create more complex understandings of the voices those children may otherwise only have considered superficially. In an article by Edmiston (1995), based on a *Space Traders Drama*, he stresses the advantages of dialogic thinking in creating a moral perspective:

If we resist dialogue then we tend to minimize our sense of responsibility and ossify our thinking. Our morality becomes more 'monologic', static, fixed and judgemental rather than dynamic and open to change. (p. 117)

Thus, dialogue is advocated in my drama practice to help children to see things from others' perspectives or hear their internal conflicting voices, from which they can extend or change their initial ideas by taking different views into consideration. In this way, the pupils are expected to learn to be more thoughtful, especially in problematic situations.

Thirdly, Winston (1998) argues that in the work of Gilligan (1982) and MacIntyre (1981), from the perspectives of postmodern consciousness, there are models of the moral life inclusive of emotion, context, and particularity to develop our moral understanding. On the one hand, he accepts Gilligan's definition of morality as "an ethic of care" in terms of relationships as well as embracing particularity, complexity, and emotional attachment. He also supports the narrative moral theories as presenting us with a form best suited to hold and convey such moral knowledge. On the other hand, Winston also follows Alasdair MacIntyre and traces our everyday understanding of morality back to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics. He sees these as a basis for moral exploration in stories commonly told to and enjoyed by children. The potential of drama to open up the virtues they inscribe for critical examination within story contexts is at the base of his drama practice. Joe Winston's belief in seeing moral life as a form of narrative and that stories can be used for conveying such moral knowledge are illuminating principles for me. The drama workshop *The Boat* conducted in this study is largely influenced by Winston's work.

As suggested by Henry (2000), drama has the potential to be a useful tool for social sciences such as education, for it offers "a dynamic, integrated and dialogical model to replace more static and predictable paradigms" (p. 59). Relying on the research tradition of using drama pedagogy to enhance children's moral development, the key issues for the drama pedagogy might be that the learning process is playful and enjoyable; children are encouraged to work socially and make their own moral decisions, albeit within fictional contexts; they will necessarily explore various moral ideas as part of this process. I will attempt to fit this approach into the Chinese system and observe how it ties in with the current moral curriculum and critically consider its workings.

Methodology

Case study as the methodological approach and data analysis framework was adopted to cater to the qualitative nature of this piece of research. My drama practice in the Chinese context would be the main case to be focused on as a specific and bounded system (Stake, 1995), aiming at offering in-depth understanding of the research inquiry of this study. As O'Toole (2006) explains, drama is by nature a non-reproducible experience where participants generate a unique set of social relationships, and case study research honors such interactions in which "the researcher is interested in and deeply involved in the structures, processes and outcomes of a project" (p. 46). In my study, the

drama workshop *The Boat* was taught and examined as an in-depth case study to explore how drama could be accepted in the Chinese educational context as a newly introduced teaching strategy to enhance elementary children's moral development. According to Stake (1995), the chief concern of a case study is the particularity of the case itself instead of optimizing generalizability; however, by studying the uniqueness, "valid modification of generalization can occur in case study" (p. 8). Therefore, the study of the particularity and complexity of my own case might provide some insight into the use of drama pedagogy in similar contexts.

School and participants

The drama workshop was conducted in a public primary school in Beijing, the capital city of China. Situated on the outskirts of the city and founded in 1936, it now has about 360 pupils studying in 12 classes, with two classes in each grade. The headmaster, Mr. Jiao, showed interests in my project and hoped to bring in drama activities as a trial. Besides, this school has a specialty in teaching athletics, calligraphy, and traditional instruments in children's spare time, to guarantee them enough playful time through sport and music. As stated by Robinson (1980), the social reality that a drama class is based upon will largely dictate its vitality and quality. Thus, I purposively chose this school that enjoyed the headmaster's support and a healthy ethos in a broader context. Sixteen pupils (six girls and ten boys) participated in my study on a voluntary basis, who came from a newly founded drama society of this school. They were around 10 years old and came from different classes in Grade three and Grade four, the majority of whom were unfamiliar with each other. The questionnaire also showed that the children engaged in the present study had little or limited drama experience, and the main attitudes they held toward my sessions were either curiosity or excitement.

Research methods

For data collection, different methods were utilized for "data triangulation" to guarantee the reliability of the data (Cohen et al., 2000) and produce a thick description of the case (Patton, 1990). The research instruments adopted in this study included (1) 16 copies of questionnaires delivered to the children before the workshop, (2) video and audio recordings of the sessions, (3) transcriptions of group interviews with the children, (4) transcription of individual interview with the headmaster, Mr. Jiao.

Questionnaire. In my study, 16 copies of questionnaires were handed to the children before the commencement of the drama workshop. Designed in three parts for detecting children's personal information, ideas on moral education and their school-based moral lessons, this questionnaire included 12 closed questions and 3 open-ended ones. Although the questionnaire was adopted as a method in my case, I am aware that this is basically a qualitative research instead of a mixed-method study.

Instead of claiming statistical significance, the questionnaires were used as a quick way of gaining useful information about the participants' background, ideas on moral education, preferred ways of learning, thoughts about the conventional moral sessions, and so on.

Observation. In this study, my role as a drama teacher made it possible for me to be a *participant* observer. Besides, video recording equipment was used for getting data for *indirect* observation. By doing so, pupils' verbal and non-verbal behaviors, interaction patterns, as well as classroom performances could be captured and kept as a relatively holistic record of the situation, which made it possible for me to revisit any of the children's behaviors that I might have ignored while teaching. When conducting observation, I was concerned with the children's responses in the drama sessions to evaluate the teaching effects and remind myself to establish a playful, cooperative, and thought-provoking learning environment.

Interview. During my research, both individual interview and group interview were implemented in a semi-structured manner for detecting problems and possible meanings that emerged from my teaching. Owing to the participants' tight schedules, I usually prepared the key questions beforehand on a piece of paper to guarantee that the duration would not exceed half an hour. On the one hand, I conducted an individual interview for the adult interviewee—the headmaster, Mr. Jiao. According to Bryman (2008), this form of interview may help to build up an atmosphere of trust and rapport for deep conversations. On the other hand, Eder and Fingerson (2001) make it clear that children tend to feel more comfortable and less pressured with the company of their peers. Therefore, group interviews were conducted for children to give voice to their own interpretations and ideas. In addition, as pointed out by Wellington (1996), children with dominant personalities tend to lead the conversation in group interviews, and the quieter ones may lose the opportunity for contribution. Therefore, to get relatively comprehensive voices from each of them, I was careful to divide the groups in accordance with the children's genders, personalities, and friendships when conducting the interview. Moreover, I was always reflexive and aware of the power balance between us, trying to avoid asking them leading questions. In total, I generated four 20-minute group interviews with the pupils—two times after each session and six participants each time. Our conversations were transcribed verbatim in Chinese.

In terms of data analysis, I reviewed both video and audio recordings of the lessons weekly until I gathered a necessary level of detail before transcribing them using conventions in Conversation Analysis (CA), adapted from Atkinson and Heritage (1984). I utilized CA to illustrate the contextual details of the communications between the players as drama involves not only verbal language but also paralinguistic features (e.g., tone, gesture, facial expressions, and body language) that may convey meanings but cannot be represented by using a simple transcription technique (Hutchby &

Wooffitt, 2008). The findings emerging from the observations are supported by the data generated from questionnaires and interviews so as to increase the reliability of the study.

Ethical considerations

In this study, permission to approach the students was gained in advance from the headmaster. I also explained my project to the children to help them gain a general idea of the drama sessions and tried my best to ensure they entered voluntarily into the research process at all times. In addition, the participants' personal information was kept as confidential and reported anonymously. In this paper, when presenting the children's ideas, I used animal names made by themselves for our drama workshop (e.g., Girl Fish) for the assurance of their privacy protection. Furthermore, in accordance with the prescribed principles and criteria set out in the University's code of conduct for research, I also submitted an application for ethical approval to the Institute of Education of the University of Warwick prior to undertaking my research.

The story of *The Boat*

Written by Helen Ward and illustrated by Ian Andrew, the picture book *The Boat* tells of an old man who lives alone on a hill, looking after a collection of abandoned animals. For him, the people who live on the opposite hill are noisy and merciless. Most villagers dislike him as well because he is bad-tempered and strange in their eyes—all except a young boy, who can feel his tenderness when he takes care of the animals. Then, one day it starts to rain ceaselessly until the old man's house becomes surrounded by rising water. The boy feels desperately worried, but there seems nothing that he can do, until a boat magically appears and drifts ashore. The boy boards it and rows toward the old man's house. However, he receives no welcome as the old man refuses his help. The boy still manages to send the nearest animals back to the village. Meanwhile, other villagers try their best to help the animals by providing shelters and bringing them blankets. The old man watches this in silence. When the boy returns and fills the boat with more animals, he does not call out. The boy rows back to the village and finds that the villagers have made a makeshift raft of tin baths and barrels to rescue more animals. He sets out for a third time with the raft following behind. This time, the old man trusts him and together they help the rest of animals to leave the island before it sinks. When they safely reach the village, the old man and the villagers stare nervously at each other. Finally, he thanks them sincerely with a smile on his face and tears melting in the rain. The villagers all come forward to greet him. At that time, the rain begins to stop, and a rainbow appears in the sky.

I came to know this picture book from the drama educator Joe Winston, who designed a scheme based upon this tale to enhance the personal growth for primary children between the ages of 8 and 12 years. The lesson plans in my study mainly rely upon his work, and the reasons for choosing this

story are listed as follows. Firstly, this mythic story is evocative of the tale of Noah's Ark from the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the little boy embodies a symbol of hope, who brings the hostile adults together (Winston, 2021). As argued by Neelands (2009), ensemble-based learning in drama represents a pedagogy of hope, where the participants have the possibility to imagine and act for a better world. Therefore, I would like to explore the theme of hope with children by means of both this story and the process of the drama class. Secondly, this tale involves the discussion of the concept of community, which is also a typical issue in domestic moral education. As a communist country, the mainstream of school values in China emphasizes the collective interest, and children are habitually nurtured in the spirit of collectivism. For example, there is one topic for the pupils in Grade Three that is called *Our Public Life* (我们的公共生活)¹, teaching children to respect those who have contributed to the collective and be well-behaved in public spaces, such as not littering or spitting. In contrast, this story portrays an isolated man who regains acceptance of the community, dealing with the relationship between individuals and the group in a more complex way. Thus, I would like to discover what inspirations this tale might bring to the pupils in terms of the ethical concept of community in my drama class.

The drama workshop included two lessons, and each lesson lasted for about 45 minutes. As the drama society, the children joined held weekly activities on Thursday afternoon; there was a one-week interval between the two sessions. A full version of the drama scheme will be provided in the Appendix.

Discussion of key findings

Imagination helps children develop empathy

As believed by McMillan (1904), the moral attitude of empathy requires a person's imaginative insight to view the world from others' perspectives, "where the power of representation (or imaginative power) fails, sympathy fails" (p. 186). Drama may offer an imaginative space for children to experience and explore the lives of other people in a variety of situations, which helps them "to develop empathy and respect for others who are culturally, historically or socially different from themselves" (Neelands, 1992, p. 6). In my practice, it appeared that children could discover the fictional roles through multiple standpoints and gain a more rounded view toward them when given the opportunity to imagine together, seeing through their eyes.

In one activity, the pupils were encouraged to explore the old man's past collectively. Under my instructions, children made up a story that explained why this character chose to isolate himself from the human world. According to them, the old man came from a poor family and no one wanted to play with him. One day, he met with a gang who invited him to join in, asked him to steal money, and promised to pay him well. The boy agreed as he wished to be wealthy and

gain others' friendship. However, the gang finally betrayed him, and the reality broke his dreams. He was so frustrated that he moved to the mountain where he rescued an injured bird from the poachers by chance. In this way, he made friends with more and more animals, which explained why he felt closer to wild animals instead of human beings.

Besides the exploration of the background of the old man, I also encouraged the children to imagine what he might look like from both the villagers' and the boy's perspectives. On the one hand, they were told to portray local people such as the market salesmen and the grave keepers. In their mind, there was a little monkey sitting on his shoulders whenever the old man appeared in the market, looking offensive and screeching noisily. Once they arrived, most people would escape immediately. Moreover, the grave keepers described the old man as a rather quiet person, usually wearing black clothes, who came to visit his parents' graves every two weeks. They thought he was a dutiful son and tried to greet him, but he never replied to any of them. On the other hand, the pupils were also invited to construct the old man's everyday life with the animals from the viewpoint of the boy. Through collective imagination, they built up their life, walking the dog on sunny days and feeding the chicks every morning. Some of the children also created little stories. For example, in Boy Pig's imagination, the old man's favorite animal, a big turtle, fell ill on a rainy night. It was very heavy, but he still managed to take it to the hospital and looked after it patiently until the turtle recovered. I then asked them to list what qualities they could find from those behaviors. Their answers included kindness, tenderness, patience, and so on. After this, Girl Panda shared her thought that there was softness in the old man's heart, although it was only left for the animals.

According to Winston (2021), the imagining, creating, and sharing of these stories may stimulate children's feelings of common humanity and help them to emphasize with other people different in age, situation, and experience. Besides, as pointed out by Li and Chau (2010), the participants have the opportunity to step into others' shoes by role-playing different figures in drama, which helps to "develop their perspective-taking and introspective ability" (p. 335). In the interview, most of the children told me that they changed their attitudes toward the old man as the drama activities went on. For example, Boy Leopard said he found the image of the old man gradually became more complex and vivid in his mind. Moreover, Girl Swan thought it was stimulating to make up stories around a figure with her peers in a drama class. Their ideas can be revealed in the following quotes using their own words:

In the beginning, I disliked him because he easily got angry when we asked him questions. When we made up the story about his past, I began to feel sorry for him as he suffered a lot in the young age. Then I felt it also reasonable for the villagers to keep away from him when hearing how he treated them unfriendly. I wished more people can see his kindness as the little boy, as the old man could be moved and become a better person. (Boy Leopard)

It feels exciting that we have created more details of the old man's life by ourselves. I can see different facets of his life through those stories and obtain a better understanding of him. (Girl Swan)

As argued by Egan (1992), rather than being proud and cruel, the ability to imagine is an essential prerequisite to develop social virtues such as respect and understanding in children, by recognizing and treating other people as "unique, distinct, and autonomous" whose lives are as real and important as their own (p. 54). Moreover, Edmiston (2000) proposes that drama enables children to use their imagination to consider other people's positions in the ways they need to behave for ethical action, as they may not do so automatically or may have a limited range of positions from which they can imagine the lives of others in everyday life. In my study, Boy Leopard thought he had more compassion for the old man after realizing it was the hardship of life that had made him ill-tempered; he also changed his initial impression of the villagers who might be cold-hearted as described by the old man because the imagined experience of old man's unfriendly behaviors made him feel sympathetic toward them as well. This is in line with another view of Edmiston (1998) that drama offers a safe and playful space for children to imagine equally the bright and dark side of human nature in a fantasy world, which helps them to explore the moral dimensions of certain situations, including both good and ill-mannered behaviors (p. 57). Such practices in a drama classroom may develop children's moral attitude of being empathetic when they try to connect with and interpret others' experiences in different times and spaces (Edmiston, 1998, p. 58).

Shaping ethical selves through dialogic thinking

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, compared with the transmission of messages, the dialogue between people is more about the dynamic and continuous process of interaction, involving the combination of the speakers' unique worldviews (Bakhtin & Medvedev, 1985). As believed by Bakhtin (1984), every individual has his/her own distinct viewpoint stemming from specific context, making the human world multivoiced. Accordingly, people can form new ethical understandings when they take other viewpoints into consideration to complement their own perspectives through dialogical and reciprocal interaction (Bakhtin, 1984). Based on his theories, Edmiston (2008) points out that such dialogue can be experienced as external conflicts between people, but it also refers to one's internal struggles between opposing ethical voices, revealing the complexities of certain moral dilemmas. Edmiston (1998) then proposes that drama can not only generate dialogues among children to consider others' perspectives in discussions, but also has the potential to contextualize the inner competing voices of a person in specific contexts, enabling students to form more thoughtful attitudes in problematic situations.

In light of these theories, children in my drama class were brought into the ethical struggles of the boy on the stormy night, in which they were given the chance to experience the tensions of his contradictory ideas in the form of a conscience alley; namely, should he sail to the old man's house in the terrible situation?

To go	Not to go
He could save lots of lives.	He might lose his life as well.
The boat could bring him safely to the old man's home.	He might get lost, or the boat could turn over halfway.
He could make friends with the old man.	The old man may turn down his help.
The animals could be moved to a safer place.	He might get hurt by some ferocious animals.
It could be a chance to bring the old man back to the community.	The villagers may not welcome the old man and his animals at all.

Based on these ideas, the students were then invited to share their thoughts in a group discussion, which enabled them to take alternative views into consideration, critically evaluate their initial opinions, and be aware of the difficulty of decision-making in this ethical dilemma. For example, Boy Giraffe at first thought it was a heroic deed to rescue others, from which the boy might receive worship and admiration from the villagers; however, Boy Monkey reminded him that those people might not welcome the old man at all. Boy Giraffe then expressed his confusion and said "In that way, the efforts would be in vain. I wish I could flip a coin to decide it." In addition, according to Boy Eagle, the boy was irrational when he decided to go because he was risking his own life; nevertheless, Girl Horse contributed her opinion that the boy did this out of affection rather than rationality, as he took the old man as his friend, and "he might never forgive himself if he ignored him in that situation."

In such a learning process, the children were not only invited to experience the moral struggles of the little boy's inner voices enlivened by drama, but also encouraged to interact with each other to achieve multiple perspectives in a problematic situation, which helped to develop their ethical selves in a more multifaceted way. As argued by Bakhtin (1984), a person's idea is not fixed in one's head but changeably created by impersonal interactions. Such a belief can be illustrated in his own words:

The idea is inter-individual and inter-subjective—the realm of its existence is not individual consciousness but dialogic communion between consciousnesses. The idea is a live event, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses. (p. 88)

Furthermore, as stated by Edmiston (1998), drama can be dialogic when children's initial thoughts are challenged, broadened, or revised by exploring conflicting points of view and reflecting upon the meaning of possible behavioral consequences in difficult situations, which may complicate their understanding of issues of moral significance (p. 60). The discussion in my classroom, to some extent, enabled the participants to critically evaluate their earlier choices and take alternative points of view into consideration. In this process, some children destabilized their initial thoughts and admitted to confusion in their mind. As stated by Maxine Greene, "Naming, articulating, affirming the dissonances and contradictions in our consciousnesses, we may be able to choose ourselves as ethical in unexpected ways" (cited in Edmiston, 1998, p. 82).

As discussed above, drama has the potential to enhance children's dialogic thinking and inspire them to develop their ethical selves in a more comprehensive way. However, I am also aware that the creation of such a dialogic space requires the teacher's awareness of respecting the children's voices. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) make it clear that, to build up a dialogic classroom, the students' voices should not be "excluded, marginalized, ignored or just be seen as something cute or funny" (p. 101); instead, the teacher needs to relinquish his/her position of authority and participate with the children to establish a more respectful, active, and open learning relationship (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). In this way, the children's perspectives will be respected, based on which they can construct the meaning together through dynamic interactions and discussions with their peers, as well as with their teacher, in a drama classroom.

Exploring moral concept in specific contexts

According to Edmiston (1998), morality relies more on the considerations of a specific context in everyday life, compared with applying abstract principles in disregard of the specialty of the relationship, time, and place. Furthermore, he believed drama could be inspiring "when participants contemplate specific urgent action rather than talk about generalities and abstractions" (Edmiston, 1998, p. 61). In my practice, I explored and examined children's ideas of the moral notion of community in light of the concrete and detailed settings provided by story-based drama.

In one activity, the pupils were encouraged to perform the imagined roles of the villagers, such as the veterinary doctors, to explore how the ill-tempered old man would interact with other people in a common space. In this instance, they suggested that such a figure might sometimes spit on the floor, and it was useless to warn him to obey the rules of the hospital. As the children were also taught not to spit in public for the sake of the environment, I would like to explore if they would gain different understanding of such a behavior compared with their normal moral sessions. In the interview, Girl Fish told me that although she was taught that spitting in public is impolite, she felt the imagined experiences of the old man enabled her to realize there might be some reasons for such bad-mannered behavior—the old man did this to express his anger and distrust toward

other people. She also believed that only through others trying to understand and help the old man sincerely, such as the little boy, could his willingness to care about others be restored, rather than through persuading or punishing him in accordance with the code of behavior.

In addition, children were also invited to write letters to the old man in the name of the villagers, trying to convince him to return to the community on the stormy night. In this activity, Girl Panda wrote, “Hi old man, we won’t treat you as before, please sail safely back to us.” Beside the words, she also drew some illustrations on the paper, as described in her following words:

On the right, I drew a boat in a peaceful scenery because I wished the old man could have a safe journey back to the village. In the middle, I thought he might feel warm when seeing the candle and the smile in the rainstorm. The left part showed my understanding of the collective. A good community should be like a garden with flowers, that everyone works hard as the bees and takes care of it attentively, like the villagers try best to make the raft for the old man. (Girl Panda)

In light of the evidence, drama has the potential in providing specific social contexts based on the narrative of the story to promote children’s autonomous thinking abilities and form more complicated and interwoven understandings. As argued by MacIntyre (1981), each person is “essentially a story-telling animal,” whose life represents a narrative structure in which he/she experiences adventures, including progress and danger, success and failure, from birth to death; thus, his/her understanding of morality is internally linked with personal life in various historical contexts and social situations. MacIntyre then proposes that the dramatic narratives of stories can inform and inspire children as to what the moral life might be, rather than asking them to follow a set of general principles (1981, p. 216). Furthermore, according to Neelands (1992), compared with a symbolic level of generalization and concepts delivered in the conventional curriculum, stories and play in a drama classroom can better help children to comprehend abstract thought, as they offer specific contexts and concrete examples connected with human experience. In my classroom, Girl Fish gained a more sophisticated understanding of the behavior of spitting based on her imagination of the old man’s possible situation. Besides, Girl Panda expressed her personal idea on how a good community should function in creating a painting.

In the interview, the headmaster, Mr. Jiao, shared with me some of his thoughts on the drama pedagogy. He compared my drama class with another moral lesson he had observed, as revealed in the following quote:

In my experience, these children are rarely so delightful and creative in their normal classes. I am indeed impressed. I remember another moral lesson I have observed recently. The teacher taught the children to line up in public places, after which they all nodded their heads and the result appeared to be successful. However, when the class was over, the kids piled up again at the exit as usual. In this drama class,

they don't have to sit still to receive the teacher's instructions, and I think it has achieved better effects.
(Mr. Jiao)

To sum up, in light of my experience, drama can provide specific contexts that enable the children to learn morality in a narrative way, instead of following abstract moral codes passively. As Yu (2004) points out, "Character building does not stop at the recitation of context-free moral traits or codes ... Moral education must be mainly concerned with creating a condition and a process in which the moral life can flourish" (p. 5).

Conclusion

The key findings in this small-scale qualitative research have suggested that drama pedagogy may contribute to primary children's moral development in the Chinese context in the following ways. Firstly, the evidence shows that drama may stimulate young learners' imaginations and promote their social virtue of sympathy. Secondly, instead of teaching morality in a monologic manner, drama has the capacity to initiate children's moral thinking in a dialogic way and help them to shape more complex, ethical selves through experiencing alternative perspectives and interrelated discourses. Thirdly, drama may develop children's narrative mode of mind and inform them what an ethical life might be by engaging their own ideas in specific contexts, instead of requiring them to follow abstract moral codes in a passive way.

However, I am also aware that different issues and problems may emerge for any class teacher who might wish to incorporate drama as part of their ordinary curriculum, where classes are larger and in which children do not attend on a voluntary basis. From my experience, it is common that drama is included in Chinese primary schools as an extra-curricular activity in the form of a drama club or society, in which students participate as volunteers. Therefore, the present study can be seen as most pertinent to those teachers who already work with small groups in a voluntary class.

In terms of my suggestion for further research, firstly, it might be interesting in a future study to explore how local stories can be explored and reinterpreted by children through drama. The story adopted in my fieldwork came from a foreign culture. Though it was well accepted and understood by the students, these children also expressed a willingness to experience dramatic activities with some Chinese stories that they were more familiar with. Their favorite stories included *The Magic Paintbrush*, *The Legend of Nezha*, *The Adventures of Mulan*, and so on. Secondly, although this study has some quantitative elements in the form of questionnaires, these were mainly used as a quick way of gathering information from the children to complement the qualitative data and do not carry any claim of statistical significance. Therefore, what is further required might be a longitudinal study on a larger scale in which both quantitative and qualitative methods can be used properly. I

hope my study may stimulate more and deeper research to further our understanding of this resourceful new pedagogy.

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Appendix

Drama scheme of *The Boat*

Sequence of activities	Duration (Approximately)	Justification of activities
Lesson 1		
1. To start with, the teacher asked the children to sit in two rows and face the blackboard, showing them the first sentence of the story, "On a hill among hills lived one old man." The teacher then gave them one minute to think what kind of old man he might be and what questions they would like to ask him. After that, the teacher took the role of the old man holding a stick and replied to children's queries according to the story, such as why he lives alone on the hill, how long he had been there, and what his daily routine was.	5 min	This activity had a dramatic and pedagogical function, encouraging the children to think and engage before they were told the story. It was also in accordance with <i>the idea of dialogue</i> promoted in their moral curriculum (Lu & Gao, 2004), in which the players had the chance to respond to the teacher quickly.
2. The teacher turned down the light to prepare to show children the illustrations from the picture book using slides. I then read the story translated by herself to music, the track <i>Dolphin</i> from the album <i>Bones</i> by Gabrielle Roth and the Mirrors.	7 min	The slides and music made the process more like a performance, which could encourage the children to engage more compared with merely reading to them.
3. The teacher asked the children to form a circle, sitting on the floor. Using a story wand, the teacher took the role of the narrator and encouraged them to act the story out using their bodies spontaneously and collectively, in which children formed the characters such as the boy, the old man, the villagers, the animals, the boat, and the raft.	8 min	In this activity, the children were enlisted into spontaneous physicalization by interpreting with each other instinctively, which not only brought the body into play as central for the learning in drama, but also connected with the issues of building trust.
4. The children were divided into four groups to reflect on the story by discussing its most impressive and	10 min	In this activity, the children were encouraged to create still images of moral meaning. Such stillness could

(continued)

Appendix (continued)Drama scheme of *The Boat*

Sequence of activities	Duration (Approximately)	Justification of activities
<p>thought-provoking moments. After that, each group was encouraged to create a still image to reveal the special moments such as those of despair, surprise, friendship, and reconciliation. They were viewed in turn, in which the teacher and children also discussed the moral significance of those moments together.</p>	8 min	<p>help them to reveal morality in a simple way, while may also provide their classmates opportunities to examine and reflect on ethical responses (Winston, 2000, p. 96).</p>
<p>5. The teacher asked the children to stand in a circle and invited them to briefly describe the old man in their eyes. Their answers included strange, independent, and ill-tempered. The teacher then told them to imagine what experience this old man might have in the past, leading him to be isolated. The teacher began with the sentence that "He was once a nice little boy, until something happened..." Then, with the instructions, the children made up a story together, in which they thought he came from a poor family and was betrayed by his friends, making him keep a certain distance from the human world. After that, the teacher informed them that they would explore more about the old man in the next session.</p>	8 min	<p>In this activity, the children were expected to be considerate by taking a different perspective of the main character and getting into the old man's shoes. Such an activity helps to cultivate children's empathy for others.</p>
Lesson 2		
<p>1. The teacher helped the children review the last session. After that, they were told that the old man sometimes needed to go to the village. What might he do there? The children's ideas included shopping at a market, taking animals to see the vet,</p>	10 min	<p>This activity helped the children to recognize that there were reasons on both sides for the conflict, which shifted the empathy for the old man to that of the villagers.</p>

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

 Drama scheme of *The Boat*

Sequence of activities	Duration (Approximately)	Justification of activities
<p>collecting abandoned animals in the circus, and paying a visit to his parents' grave in the cemetery park. They were then divided into four groups, each of which were asked to choose one different place from the options listed above. In their groups, the children were also told to mark themselves A, B, C, and D, with all the A's taking the role of the investigators from the local police station to collect information from his/her partners, and others performing the salespeople, vet doctors, managers of the circus, and grave keepers, respectively, who would describe their experiences with the old man to the investigators. After that, the teacher played the leader of the police station and asked the investigator to take turns to report their findings to the rest of the class.</p>		
<p>2. The teacher asked the children to imagine what the old man might look like in the young boy's eyes. The teacher listed different animals on the blackboard and asked them how the old man would spend his time with the animals. Their answers were feeding the chickens, taking care of a sick turtle, petting a dog tenderly, teaching a parrot to speak language, and so on. They then listed his qualities, such as being kind, warm, attentive, patient, and friendly.</p>	7 min	<p>This activity was intended to refocus the children on the old man by using the perspective of the boy to see him practicing the ethic of care for the animals, enabling them to be aware of others' situations more critically and sensitively.</p>
<p>3. The teacher informed the students of the stormy night when a boat appeared before</p>	8 min	<p>Drama has the potential to offer conflicting voices for shaping</p>

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

 Drama scheme of *The Boat*

Sequence of activities	Duration (Approximately)	Justification of activities
<p>the boy. The children were then asked to think about the reasons for him to go and not to go. Among their answers, the teacher listed five reasons for him to go on the blackboard, such as to save lives, to make friends with the old man, and to tell the old man he could trust someone in the world. Moreover, the teacher also listed some reverse reasons.</p>		<p>children's ethical selves in a more complex way, as it could problematize and enliven the moral struggles within a person's inner experience in certain situations (Edmiston, 1998, p. 58).</p>
<p>4. The teacher asked the children to represent the conflicting ideas of the boy in the form of conscience alley. Two volunteers were invited to hold a blue cloth to signify the river. A boy was chosen to play the role of the young boy in the story, holding a paper boat and wearing an eye mask. Others were divided into two groups evenly, one of which would chant out the reasons for him to go while the other would tell him the opposite. As the teacher held the boy's hand to walk through the alley, differing voices echoed around him. After that, he was interviewed about his feelings and decisions, to share with other classmates.</p>	5 min	<p>According to Winston (2000), a conscience alley in drama could help to display the tensions of different voices, in which the children could experience the difficulty and complexity of a moral dilemma, recognizing the difficulty of making a choice when competing reasons appear (pp. 106–107).</p>
<p>5. The teacher gave each child a piece of blank paper to write a short letter to the old man, convincing him to be a part of the community in the name of the villagers and using their words to form a piece of the raft. The children were then asked to stand in a circle, take turns to read out their letters, and put them in the center of</p>	10 min	<p>Firstly, the process of making the raft together could enhance the group's mutuality and cooperation. Secondly, the children could also develop moral language and broaden their ethical vocabulary in this activity, which would contribute to their personal</p>

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

 Drama scheme of *The Boat*

Sequence of activities	Duration (Approximately)	Justification of activities
<p>the circle. After this, the teacher encouraged them to think about what qualities of human beings could connect each other, which would be the ropes to tie different pieces of the raft together. Their replies included kindness, devotion, care, responsibility, forgiveness, trust, bravery, and so on. The teacher wrote them on pink paper stickers to tie up all the sixteen letters to form the raft, which was named the "Raft of Love" by the children.</p>	2 min	<p>autonomy in morality, as suggested by Winston (2000, p. 93).</p>
<p>6. The teacher brought out the paper boat again and asked the children to name it, which they finally decided to call the "Boat of Hope."</p>	2 min	<p>As believed by Neelands (2009), drama represents a pedagogy of hope, in which young people can take actions for a better future.</p>
