Vol. 12, Issue 1
July 2026
pp. 16–27
https://caet.inspirees.com

CAET
Creative Arts in Education and Therapy
East, West and Global Perspectives

DOI: https://doi.org/10.67806/CAET/2026/12/1/03

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Drama Education as a Pathway to Core Competency Development: Insights from a Chinese Vocational College

戏剧教育是培养核心素养的途径：中国职业院校的启示

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KEYWORDS
Drama education
Core competencies
Vocational college
Mixed methods
Embodiment
Aesthetic learning
Pre-service teacher education

关键词
戏剧教育
核心能力
高职院校
混合研究法
具身性
审美学习
职前教师教育

ABSTRACT

Drama education offers a unique avenue for enhancing the 5Cs (5 basic competencies) for pre-service teachers. This article examines the 16-week project that involved pre-service teaching students in a higher vocational college dedicated to middle school-age students in China. Participants engaged in drama education processes and then shared their experiences through performance, written reflection, and collaborative meaning-making. The findings from this research indicate that participants demonstrated greater mastery of the five competencies: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and cultural awareness. The qualitative data revealed that through drama activities such as role-play, improvisation scripts, and performance, participants gained more embodied, relational, and aesthetic knowledge about teaching. Teacher participants reported feeling more confident in their teaching abilities, more empathetic toward their students, and more creative and reflective in their instructional planning. Observations of the students in drama activities revealed greater trust, more active engagement, a higher degree of responsiveness, and intercultural awareness. This study examines the potential of drama pedagogy as an integral approach to fostering holistic vocational competence training and development in teacher education.

摘要

戏剧教育为提升职前教师的5Cs（五项基本核心能力）提供了一条独特路径。本文考察了一个为期16周的实践项目，该项目涉及中国一所高职院校中面向中学学段培养方向的职前师范生。在该项目中，参与者通过戏剧教育过程开展学习，并通过表演、书面反思和协作性意义建构来分享他们的经验。研究结果表明，参与者对五项核心能力（即协作、沟通、批判性思维、创造力与文化意识）有了更深的掌握。质性数据进一步显示，通过角色扮演、即兴创作、剧本活动和表演等戏剧实践，参与者获得了更多具身性、关系性和审美性的教学知识。参与项目的职前教师反馈称，他们在教学能力上更加自信，对学生更具同理心，在教学设计中也表现出更强的创造力与反思能力。对学生在戏剧活动中表现的观察表明，他们表现出更高程度的信任、更积极的投入、更高的回应度以及更丰富的跨文化意识。本研究探讨了戏剧教学法作为一种整合性路径，在师范教育中促进职业能力综合培养与发展的潜力。

Official Journal of the International Association of Creative Arts in Education and Therapy (IACAET)

IACAET

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1. INTRODUCTION

Vocational education in China has undergone a transition from skills training to talent development. The shift not only emphasizes knowledge acquisition but also the cultivation of the potential of students, improvement of their vocational competence in practical work situations, and the development of the 5Cs – collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and cultural awareness. The 5Cs are now viewed as necessary competencies for new college graduates in education and employment. This paper reviews various approaches taken by Chinese vocational education to cultivate these competencies.

However, much classroom practice in vocational education is still teacher-focused and examination-oriented. There is a continuing need for participatory, experiential and dialogic approaches to learning and teaching. Drama education is an embodied, relational and interdisciplinary pedagogy that involves learners thinking, feeling, imagining and communicating through action. Drama education has been reported to have positive outcomes for speaking and listening skills (Winston, 2002); for empathy, critical thinking and problem-solving (Winston, 2002); and multicultural literacy, learner agency, and embodied meaning-making (Liu et al., 2024; Grushka, 2024; Blanc et al., 2025).

While research into the effects of drama education tends to focus on broader educational outcomes or explores specific effects, such as fostering creativity, confidence, and thinking or expression, there is a comparative lack of research that investigates how drama education can support the integrated development of the 5Cs in general and, more specifically, in teacher education contexts. Such an approach is lacking in both general research contexts and in teacher education specifically, particularly in non-Western cultures and at the pre-service stage. Embodied communicative skill, relational awareness, and the capacity to think, reflect, respond thoughtfully, creatively, and ethically are all key aspects of teaching that pre-service teachers need to acquire, alongside an understanding of the content they will teach and information about how to teach it effectively.

This article reports on research conducted into how a 16-week English drama course promoted the 5Cs (creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration and civic-mindedness) in a group of English education majors at one of China's vocational colleges. The study reports on emerging international research about drama in education from the particular vantage point of vocational teacher education in China. This paper also explores how drama pedagogy can develop English teaching competence and how drama can serve as a methodology grounded in skills development, embodied learning, relational approaches to teaching and learning, and diverse aesthetic ways of knowing and being.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The 5Cs Framework and its Educational Significance

The 5Cs—collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and cultural awareness—are widely recognised as key competencies for life and work in the 21st century (Rui et al., 2020). For pre-service teachers, these competencies are also central to professional formation, since teaching requires communication, judgment, cooperation, imagination, and intercultural responsiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

In China, the emphasis on core competencies aligns with wider educational reform agendas that seek to promote quality-oriented education and more holistic forms of human development (Ministry of Education, 2021). For this reason, identifying pedagogical approaches that can cultivate multiple competencies simultaneously is especially important in teacher education.

Drama pedagogy is particularly well-suited to this task. Through role-play, improvisation, script development, rehearsal, and performance, learners are required to collaborate, communicate, interpret, evaluate, and create. Because these processes are enacted through the body and in relation to others, drama can support not only cognitive growth but also embodied participation and relational awareness. In this sense, drama aligns with broader arts-based scholarship that understands learning as emergent through action, interaction, and reflection rather than through verbal instruction alone (Aitken et al., 2007; Grushka, 2024).

Cultural learning can also be deepened through drama because participants do not simply discuss differences in the abstract; they explore them through voice, gesture, rhythm, spatial relationships, and perspective-taking in situated contexts. Such work is particularly relevant in vocational and language-learning settings, where communication involves not only linguistic accuracy but also embodied and culturally responsive ways of being with others.

Viewed through the 5Cs framework, drama offers an integrated pedagogical structure rather than five distinct training strands. Group rehearsal supports collaboration and communication; interpretive negotiation fosters critical thinking; imaginative reworking encourages creativity; and intercultural enactment expands cultural awareness. The value of

drama, therefore, lies not only in what learners know at the end of a course, but also in the embodied, relational, and aesthetic processes through which that knowledge is formed.

Drama pedagogy thus provides a coherent way to approach competency development through one educational method, while preserving the complexity and interdependence of the 5Cs.

2.2. Drama Education and Core Competency Development

Research on drama education consistently suggests that drama-based processes can support multiple dimensions of learning. Studies have shown that drama helps learners develop verbal expression, emotional communication, and the use of gesture and body language (Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Winston, 2012). Other work highlights drama's role in promoting empathy, teamwork, and mutual responsiveness through collaborative creation and ensemble practice (Neelands, 2009; Gallagher & Freeman, 2016).

Drama can also foster critical thinking, creativity, and intercultural understanding. When learners interpret characters, adapt scripts, and negotiate alternative meanings, they are required to evaluate perspectives, imagine possibilities, and justify choices (Heathcote & Bolton, 1994; Catterall, 2002). When they work with stories and scenarios shaped by different cultural contexts, they also become more sensitive to the values, assumptions, and expressive conventions embedded in those contexts (West, 2021).

Even so, relatively few studies have conceptualized drama as a holistic pathway for the development of all five competencies together. Existing work often emphasises one outcome at a time, and research in vocational education remains especially limited. More evidence is needed from contexts outside Euro-American schooling, particularly from settings in which drama may offer an alternative to examination-driven and teacher-dominated classroom cultures.

2.3. International Comparative Studies on Drama in Vocational Education

International research on drama has largely emerged from Western educational settings. Even so, studies from India, South Africa, and Brazil suggest that drama can also support communication, collaboration, and critical reflection among vocational and adult learners, especially in contexts marked by inequality or limited resources (Kakita & Palukuri, 2019; Mokoena, 2019; Henschke, 2009). These studies indicate that drama-based pedagogy is adaptable across diverse educational and cultural contexts.

At the same time, empirical studies of drama in Asian vocational education remain limited. This lack of evidence is significant in contexts such as China, where examination pressure and teacher-centered traditions often shape classroom practice. More comparative and context-sensitive research is therefore needed to examine how drama pedagogy can contribute to competency development in vocational systems with different institutional and cultural conditions.

2.4. Drama Education in the Chinese Vocational Context

In China, drama education has more often been associated with general education, elite higher education, or extracurricular enrichment than with vocational training (Liu et al., 2024). Although national policy has encouraged more innovative and learner-centered approaches (The Central Committee of the Communist Party and the General Office of the State Council, 2021), classroom implementation in vocational teacher education remains uneven because of assessment pressures, heavy workloads, and limited institutional support.

Recent pilot work in Chinese educational settings nevertheless suggests that drama-based pedagogy can increase classroom participation, language confidence, and interdisciplinary engagement (Cheng et al., 2023; Hua et al., 2024). For English education majors in particular, drama may be especially valuable because it creates opportunities to strengthen communication, confidence, reflective judgment, and cultural responsiveness through practice rather than through decontextualised instruction alone.

2.5. Gaps in the Literature

This study, therefore seeks to contribute empirical evidence from Chinese vocational teacher education to the literature on drama and competency development. By focusing on participants' lived experiences and observed classroom processes, it also responds to calls for more contextually grounded accounts of how drama works pedagogically, socially, and aesthetically.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design that combined pre- and post-course questionnaires, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. The design was intended to provide both measurable evidence of change and richer interpretive insight into how participants experienced drama-based learning over time.

The intervention took place within a 16-week English drama course that formed part of a teacher education curriculum at a Chinese vocational college. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from multiple sources, allowing for triangulation across self-reported change, observed classroom practice, and participants' retrospective reflections.

3.2. Context and Participants

The study was conducted in the fall semester of 2023 at a public vocational college in China with a teacher education program in foreign languages. Participants were 98 second-year English education majors (93 females and 5 males), aged 19–21. The gender distribution reflected the demographics of the program, although it may also have shaped interactional dynamics in the classroom. This should be considered when interpreting the findings and in designing future studies.

3.3. Intervention: Drama-Based Instruction

The 16-week course introduced participants to a sequence of drama-based activities designed to support collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and cultural awareness.

The main instructional components were as follows:

Improvisation, through which participants responded in role, experimented with language, and developed emotional and imaginative flexibility in interaction with peers.

Role-play, through which participants entered real-world and intercultural situations that required them to explore unfamiliar values, relationships, and communicative norms.

Script work, through which participants collaboratively transformed stories and social issues into performance texts, drawing on both critical reflection and creative interpretation.

Collaborative performance, through which each group rehearsed and staged its work for an audience, developing shared ownership, collective responsibility, and meaning-making through performance.

One representative role-play task invited participants to imagine themselves as newly arrived African trainees adjusting to their first day at a vocational college in China. The activity was designed in relation to China–Africa vocational cooperation and encouraged participants to consider not only language use, but also greeting practices, gestures, interpersonal distance, turn-taking, and other culturally situated forms of communication. Through enactment and reflection, participants became more aware of their own habits while experimenting with more responsive intercultural interaction.

3.4. Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and observations.

Questionnaire:

A web-based Likert scale-type questionnaire was administered prior to and following the course session through the Questionnaire Star platform. All 98 participants provided matched data at both the pre- and post-stages of the course and completed the questionnaire in full.

Interview:

Fifteen interviews were conducted, which were recorded over time with a duration of 30 to 45 minutes per interview. In the researcher's office, participants were asked semi-structured questions about their perceptions of changes in their emotional, cognitive and social competencies with regard to the five competencies.

Observation:

We held regular observations of classroom interactions, engagement in drama activities, pupils' creative thinking and collaborative work over the semester as part of ongoing classroom research.

Data credibility:

The potential biases associated with the dual role of teacher-researcher were minimised through methodological triangulation, using three data collection methods: questionnaires, interviews, and observations. The findings from these methods were then compared and cross-checked to strengthen the validity of the evidence.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using paired-sample t-tests and effect sizes (Cohen's d) to examine changes in each of the five competency areas before and after the intervention (Rosenberg et al., 2013).

This paper describes an analysis of qualitative data about classrooms that combines inductive and deductive approaches. Patterns that appeared in the data were identified, patterns across qualitative data sources compared, and those patterns were mapped onto the five 5Cs dimensions of collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and cultural awareness throughout a semester.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study follows the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Data were anonymised, securely stored, and used solely for academic purposes.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Quantitative Results: Overall Improvement in the 5Cs

Table 1 presents the pre- and post-intervention results for the five core competencies (5Cs): Collaboration, Communication, Critical Thinking, Creativity, and Cultural Awareness. Across all dimensions, mean scores increased following the drama-based intervention. The overall mean rose from 3.58 to 4.13, indicating a general improvement of 0.55.

Among the five competencies, Critical Thinking showed the greatest increase (0.65), suggesting that the analytical and reflective nature of drama activities supported participants' reasoning and evaluative abilities. Collaboration and Creativity also demonstrated notable gains (0.56 and 0.55, respectively), reflecting the impact of group performance and improvisational tasks. Communication and Cultural Awareness increased at a moderate level (0.49 and 0.51), indicating that drama activities facilitated interpersonal interaction and cross-cultural understanding. Overall, the quantitative data point to a positive effect of drama pedagogy on pre-service teachers' development across the 5Cs.

4.2. Qualitative Results

This section qualitatively elaborates on how the findings were experienced and interpreted by participants. These qualitative findings complement the quantitative findings on how the participants' understanding concerning the five

Table 1. Pre- and post-intervention mean scores of students' 5C competencies.

Competency	Pre-intervention	Post-intervention	Mean increase
Collaboration	3.45	4.01	0.56
Communication	3.76	4.25	0.49
Critical Thinking	3.40	4.05	0.65
Creativity	3.58	4.13	0.55
Cultural Awareness	3.72	4.23	0.51
Total Literacy	**3.58**	**4.13**	**0.55**

competencies for integrating health developed from the early stages of learning to more advanced stages of practice, planning and reflection.

4.2.1. Collaboration: Building Trust and Collective Responsibility

Collaboration in the production of a show involves many elements. Most participants described collaboration in production as building trust, dependence, and responsibility. One production participant described her experience during rehearsals when the cast developed more trust. "Everybody knew what they were supposed to do," she said, "if one person was missing, a scene would not work." Another participant described collaboration as giving up more of her personal space and not insisting as much on her ideas.

Students worked more independently this term, in pairs and small groups. They worked well and were able to help each other, coming up with their own ideas for blocking and prop placement, as well as deciding on the setting for the stage.

4.2.2. Communication: From Hesitation to Confidence

Throughout this lesson, students progressed from simply speaking in English to using non-verbal communication and various performance techniques to reach their audiences. The students' confidence in applying these new skills, as well as their understanding of themselves, improved alongside their oral English proficiency. One student wrote, "I used to be so nervous. By the end of week 8, I am not nervous to speak English anymore. I can actually teach in class in character and even argue back with students." Another student from this lesson observed, "I have learned that it's not just about speaking English, it's about how you get a point or message across, expressing your feelings and connecting with your audience."

Observed children's behaviour went through a similar transition in how they communicated. At first, children had simply echoed the teacher's words as if they were puppets. This was followed by children starting to speak, then beginning to improvise short scenes and also expressing themselves increasingly through embodied action and carefully managed facial expressions. Children's communication became more dialogic and interactive.

4.2.3. Critical Thinking: Negotiation and Perspective-Taking

Critical thinking was encouraged through communication and collaboration, particularly in rehearsal, where students worked with each other to decide a character's motivation and moral intention. Likewise, as students prepared the play for performance, they grappled with issues like how forgiveness could be portrayed as anything other than weakness and worked on scripts to affirm their own perspectives. For example, as they prepared The Kind Fox for performance, students grappled with the morality of the main character's decision to forgive his brother for evil deeds.

In reflecting on the interviews, it was clear that drama had enabled the children to move on from just articulating differences towards actually disagreeing and reasoning through it, even questioning the motive behind the choice. One child reflected, "I started thinking about the motive behind the choice, not only the action of it." Another student noted, "I liked rewriting a new ending. I got to solve a puzzle together with another person."

4.2.4. Creativity: Imagination through Multimodal Expression

We explored creativity through script adaptation, prop making and sound and experimented with different forms of performance. All the children thoroughly enjoyed the project because, for the first time, they felt able to alter a familiar story; the props and sound effects gave them more opportunity to think visually and creatively.

Throughout the program, students actively engaged in the multimodal tasks with students from the other groups. Students were introduced to a variety of techniques for expressing themselves creatively through visual design, scriptwriting and performing. Students developed their critical thinking and creative skills throughout the program and showed these off in their adaptation of The Kind Fox, which was completely created from recycled materials. Students were not limited to interpreting the script as it was written; instead, students really put their own stamp on the work by translating the classic tale to a modern-day urban setting, where the story took on a life of its own through students' creative ideas and interpretations that were explored and developed throughout the process of production.

4.2.5. Cultural Awareness: Intercultural Understanding through Performance

The use of Drama performance as a means to negotiate cultural difference went beyond the depiction of issues related to cultural difference. Participants and audience members shared their experiences and insights of how using stories of migration, displacement and family separation in drama performance could facilitate greater empathy towards others who are experiencing such issues. One participant commented that performing a drama about migration helped her to think differently about mobility by drawing parallels between the migration of people to other countries and the separation of family members living within their own home communities.

We explored stories fictional and real while linking them to cultural contexts. Participants gained deeper insights into how values shape a sense of belonging, identity, rhythm and motivation and saw how these stories function differently across Chinese and English-speaking cultural contexts. Furthermore, they gained insight into the different moral perspectives and storytelling styles in both cultures.

The pieces were reworked in English and Spanish, including all staging and script, and performed fully bilingual and with cultural adaptations. This work was approached from an intercultural learning perspective, and therefore thoroughly embodied and relational as well as linguistic. The shifts in the performances in terms of language, gesture, timing, and vocal quality all reflected different modes of communication.

4.3. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The analysis of the quantitative data on competencies and the qualitative data on drama-based learning experiences revealed positive gains in all five competencies. Most notably, the data analysis and the participants' descriptions of learning revealed evident gains in collaboration and communication. The interviews and observations provided more detailed insights regarding the development of critical thinking, creativity and cultural awareness. The findings have strong pedagogical implications for teaching and learning using drama in vocational teacher education contexts.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Drama as a Catalyst for Collaboration

All of the scenes created were through collaboration. Catterall (2007) states that drama is a collective learning process, and this was certainly the case with our performances. Everyone collaborated to create scenes, assigned parts and worked collectively to put on the finished performance. From a socio-cultural perspective, learning is a process of development, and a key aspect of this is that learning is mediated by the individual's interaction with others. In our performance, the participants worked through the process of putting on a drama performance through interdependence rather than in parallel towards the same end goal, as suggested by Vygotsky & Cole (2018).

While trust and cooperation were established through drama pedagogies in the Chinese vocational setting, culturally specific interactional norms influenced collaboration. Relational harmony, deference and face-saving created strong pressures towards consensus-oriented talk. As such, participants relied on indirect language, such as 'maybe' and 'what if', to negotiate, rehearse and test out ideas without giving offence to others. These findings extend drama scholarship on relational pedagogy, revealing how trust and cooperation are constructed within this space, and are strongly mediated by local cultural norms and group ethics (Aitken et al., 2007).

In addition to serving as a space for organisations to practice and prepare for performances, improvisation rehearsal time also became a space for artists to practice and learn to manage uncertainty, respond to the unexpected, and cultivate trust in their relationships with others. This way cooperation was not only organisational, but also affective and relational.

5.2. Communication: Integrating Verbal and Non-Verbal Expression

The findings on the area of communication suggested that drama had provided the participants with an experience that extended their fluency in spoken English beyond the spoken word. Through drama, the participants had experienced using eye contact, facial expression, gesture, pace and space within communication. Within the drama lessons and video recordings of those lessons, the speakers' communication had been embodied. Meaning had been created and conveyed through the physical bodies of the participants as well as their spoken words.

In this study, embodiment was seen as more than a secondary aspect of communication that could be used to supplement cognition. Rather, embodiment was a core aspect of communication that influenced how individuals connected to others. As an arts-based study, communication was something that the participants felt, did, and adjusted as they tried to connect with others. Their learning integrated their speech, movement, tone, and presence.

The paper also draws upon the authors' experiences of using drama in language learning, highlighting its potential to reduce language anxiety and increase learners' sense of risk taking through action and embodiment. Rehearsing in improvisation scenes and 'silent' sequences provides learners with opportunities to interact within a safe space, whilst engaging in action and expression through speech and body, to experiment with language use and explore their growing competencies despite the gaps, truncations and incomplete sentences which necessarily characterise the learning process. As a result, drama pedagogy opens up a wider communicative field of action by authorising a wider range of semiotic resources within language learning contexts.

5.3. Critical Thinking: Engaging with Ambiguity and Ethics

Throughout the drama activities, the participants continually made sense of the issues and content discussed during the activities and further evaluated and negotiated them. This was a key element of how participants learned through drama. Script adaptation and role negotiation have previously been used to enhance critical thinking by having participants engage in critical reflection during the process (Yang & Qin, 2024). Participants in this study, therefore, demonstrated critical thinking not only through abstract written discussions, but also through more embodied and dialogic problem-solving processes where they could test their ideas, make sense of them and gain insight as to how others would perceive their decisions.

In a recent discussion with a group of ten-year-olds about imagining alternative endings to the story of the vixen's repentance, they focused on the issue of motivation. Was the fox's repentance most convincing because he had genuinely changed his ways or because he was clever and wanted to get out of trouble? This raises interesting questions about ethics and morality when the issue is set in a moral 'in-between' place and how the audience reads behaviour in such contexts. The children were asked to imagine and perform a dramatic scene to recount the vixen's repentance. The discussion was fascinating from the children's point of view and illustrated how different meanings can be generated and how these meanings can be read in different ways through different performances.

However, going back to the performance and thinking about it was also a crucial learning experience for the students. By replaying the actions they had undertaken, the students explained their actions and, most importantly, justified them. By seeing actions in the classroom mirrored in personal interactions, within groups and within society, the teaching encouraged a sense of ethics and developed a number of metacognitive processes that extended drama education beyond its entertainment value or the personal expression of the individual student.

Continuing on from our previous session, we delved deeper into Improvisation, one of the key ways of thinking under uncertainty. Within scenes, there is the potential for drastic change within seconds, and it is crucial that actors are able to think critically within these moments. If missteps are made, it is important to recover as swiftly as possible. Therefore, the way in which we think must be highly responsive, adaptable and full of proper judgement in the heat of the moment.

5.4. Creativity: Fostering Multimodal and Divergent Thinking

In this study, creativity was explored in a multimodal, collaborative, embodied and situated manner. Creative drama was used as the methodology whereby participants verbally and physically (using gesture, sound, props, rhythm, staging and visual design) generated ideas for drama. In this study, creativity in drama is not confined to individual minds and is seen as a product that can be original and unique. Rather, creativity in drama is distributed throughout the bodies and materials that are drawn upon to create the drama and the creative process of the group.

Creativity can mean aesthetic learning. In addition to making an alternative version of a story that they had heard, participants were also experimenting and seeing how meaning shifts through different choices and mediums, such as form, tempo, image and performance. They learned by making fables of their own and working with recycled materials to create sets, add sound effects and perform their stories.

They were learning through the process of selecting and composing various forms of artistic content to make meaning aesthetically and relationally (Eisner, 2003; Magrin-Chagnolleau, 2024).

Against the usual backdrop of 'circumventing' limitations in theatre rehearsal, this research reveals how what are perceived as constraints actually served as drivers of creative work. The pressure to work within a timeframe, the expense of using certain materials and the unpredictability of how a rehearsal could unfold; all these factors prompted actors and designers to think more divergently and to test out a greater range of ideas in a playful spirit of inquiry. Creativity was therefore developed by negotiating around a series of apparent limitations rather than imagining and working within an imaginary vacuum free from constraint.

5.5. Cultural Awareness: Theatre as a Site for Intercultural Learning

Research findings in relation to cultural awareness and intercultural practice informed our use of drama as a focus for intercultural learning and understanding through embodied experience and performance of stories in different languages and cultures. Through the process, participants gained insight into how meaning is created through voice, movement, space and relationship, and we contend that intercultural learning in the arts is both relational and aesthetic.

As they took on roles and interpreted certain values within them, participants publicly grappled with how to perform or express particular values within the enacted culture. The cultural understanding was co-created in the moment of action as participants worked to understand and operationalise what had been taught. These findings are relevant to perspectives on the topics of care, community, belonging and connection within arts-based practice (Grushka, 2024; Blanc et al., 2025).

The rural adaptations reveal that participants did not simply translate the story into local dialect and community language, but actually re-authored the story within a new social and cultural order, shifting the individualistic moral logic of the original to a more communal one. The rural adaptations also revealed how learners perceive cultural values and how these are embodied, localised and aesthetically re-constructed through drama.

These improvisations increased the participants' sensitivity to aspects of tone, posture, speaking speed and emotional rhythm. Inter-cultural competence was experienced as being 'lived' in the body and in the relationships with others, as opposed to mere rules and terms.

5.6. Implications for Drama Education in the Chinese Vocational Context

This research supports the use of drama pedagogy in the context of Chinese vocational education. The findings highlight the potential of drama as a structured pedagogical approach, which can facilitate learners' progression from the receipt of information to more experiential learning, and ultimately expression of their learning. This approach is especially relevant in cultures that are characterised by hierarchical educational structures and collective orientations, within which there is an over-protective learning culture in which students are generally reluctant to take risks in learning and teaching. Drama pedagogy creates a secure learning environment that enables learners to inhabit identities and enact personas without breach of social etiquette.

The findings have implications for the aims of education and the potential of drama pedagogy to bring together the competence-orientation and more humanistic goals of education. Skills such as empathy, reflective practice, responsiveness to others, and imagination, alongside skilful communication and problem-solving, were seen as critical competencies for drama educators. These interrelated skills are critical in vocational teacher education and offer drama educators a way of addressing the relational challenges, uncertainty and ethical dilemmas that are a normative part of teaching classrooms.

This research contributes to approaches that embed teaching and learning through drama in several significant ways. Firstly, it elucidates how embodiment, relational and aesthetic learning modes are integral to making the 5Cs learnable within a drama pedagogy context. Secondly, it shows that embodiment, relational and aesthetic learning modes are not add-ons to teaching and learning with drama in vocational education settings. Rather, they are key mechanisms through which the 5Cs can be learned and interpreted. Finally, the study highlights the particular potential of using drama as a means to enhance learning in vocational settings through a unique integration of body, relationship and artistic form or aesthetic.

5.7. Reflexivity

As teacher-researchers, our dual roles within the classroom possibly affected the learning environment within the classroom and the data we collected. In order to establish the trustworthiness of our findings, we drew on a number of sources of data, including teacher and child questionnaires, teacher and observer narratives of classroom events, samples of the children's work and semi-structured interviews. As we recognised our own positions influenced the whole process of data collection, our reflexive consideration of these positions affected the whole process of data analysis and not solely at the end of the process.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. Key Contributions

This paper examines the pedagogical potential of drama education to promote collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity and cultural awareness for pre-service teachers. It reports on a teaching practice project conducted by teachers from one Chinese vocational college, and discusses the positive outcomes and processes involved. Drama functioned as an embodied, relational and aesthetic pedagogy that served as a teaching method and medium through which pre-service teachers could engage in simulation of communication, negotiate meaning and explore alternative teaching approaches within a collaborative learning environment.

6.2. Limitations

Although some insight has been gained into some of the gender issues in vocational settings, there are certain limitations in this study. Firstly, the research was conducted in one institution and generalisation to other contexts and settings may not be appropriate. Secondly, the majority of the participants in the research were women, and therefore their perspectives may have dominated the findings. A third limitation was the dual role that the researcher had in the study, that of teacher and researcher, and how this may have influenced the data that was collected, as well as how it was interpreted.

6.3. Future Research

Future research possibilities include taking a cross-institutional, cross-regional or longitudinal focus to explore how drama pedagogy operates within various vocational disciplines and educational settings. Future research possibilities also include how drama pedagogy supports the development of vocational competencies through the embodied, relational and aesthetic qualities of the pedagogy and through methods of data collection such as observation, reflective journaling and the use of arts-based or ethnographic research methods over time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was supported by the College-Level Research Project of Wuhan City Polytechnic (Project No. 2025WHCPS05), titled Research on Pathways to Enhancing Intercultural Competence among Higher Vocational Students in the context of Double High-level Major Clusters construction.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data on which the study is based were accessed from a repository and are available for downloading through the following link: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/11iCWOlaDjuWEb_Z_OaJoqw0uwIWHrwoo?usp=sharing

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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