

Playback Theater as Pedagogy: A Qualitative Research Study on the Use of PT in Education toward the Self-development of Future Teachers

回放剧场作为教学法：PT(回放剧场)在教育中用于未来教师自我发展的定性研究

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Abstract

Self-development is an important basis for the professional development of teachers and future teachers. In this study, future teachers are graduate students whose majors are school counseling and mental health education. The performance of playback theater (PT) in the classroom has become an integral part of teaching, especially for teaching integral drama-based pedagogy (IDBP). Using qualitative research methods, researchers found that PT enables future teachers to deeply develop and experience “respect” and “empathy.” PT actively promotes self-development by using empathy as the main factor for promoting change in self-cognition, behavior, and emotional release. The improvisational action presents storytellers with accessible forms of empathic reaction. Researchers have discovered that the use of theater ritual and artistry are the external conditions for inspiring empathy by creating an atmosphere of equality, respect, and inclusion. Moreover, this atmosphere also promotes dialogue. Having learned empathy, individuals connect better with each and become more open to self-development through reflection.

Keywords: playback theater (PT), self-development, future, teacher, qualitative research, integral drama based pedagogy (IDBP), innovative teaching, higher education (HE)

摘要

自我发展是教师和未来教师专业发展的重要基础。在这项研究中所指的未来教师是研究生，其专业是学校咨询和心理健康教育。回放剧院(PT)在课堂上的表演已成为教学的一个组成部分，特别是对于整合性教育戏剧(IDBP)的教学而言。本研究利用定性研究方法展开研究，研究人员发现，PT使未来教师能够深入发展和体验“尊重”和“共情”。以共情作为主要因素，PT可有促进自我认知、行为的改变和情绪的释放，积极地促进自我发展。即兴演出为讲故事的人提供了易于理解的共情反应形式。研究人员同时还发现，戏剧仪式和艺术性的作用构成激发共情的外部条件，它是通过创造平等、尊重和包容的氛围来实现的。此外，这种氛围也促进了对话。通过学习共情，个体可以更好地彼此建立联结，并通过反思使得自我发展更为开放。

关键词: 回放剧场 (PT), 自我发展, 未来教师, 定性研究, 整合性教育戏剧 (IDBP), 创新教学, 高等教育 (HE)

Introduction

Higher education (HE) is experiencing a theoretical and practical shift toward “holistic education,” educating the whole person especially when considering creativity (Taylor & Holmwood, 2018). As an educator, every teacher tries to keep developing and reflecting on their academic and teaching and learning practice as a whole person (Palmer, 2007). This requires comprehensive innovative teaching approaches where educators in HE seek to address the emotional, social, ethical, and academic needs of future teachers in an integrated learning format.

Drama and theater, as a pedagogy for the “whole person” for children and juveniles has been developed for decades (Slade, 1954; Heathcote, 1977; Bolton, 1984; O’Neill, 1995; McCaslin, 1996; Neelands, 1998; Dawson & Lee, 2016). In China, its use has been developed in conjunction with action research since 2005, when Ma developed integral drama-based pedagogy (IDBP) (Ma, 2019; Ma & Subbiondo, 2021; Ma & Li, 2022), for teacher training, and for use with graduate students whose majors are in school counseling and mental health education. Drama and theater also are applied to teachers and educators as well as to IDBP integrated educational drama and therapeutic drama practitioners. A case study (Ma, 2014) shows that teachers are more open to self-reflection using an IDBP based approach, and the same is true for future teachers (Ma & Subbiondo, 2021; Ma & Li, 2022). Self-reflection and personal development are becoming a much more important part of teachers’ future professional development.

Playback theater (PT), created in 1975 (Salas, 1996), is a particular improvisational art form involving interactive theater. In PT, individuals recount personal experiences that actors immediately enact or mirror on stage. According to Chasen (2011), in the contested field of mirror neurons, the neurons fire in the brain of the observer as if they are experiencing the activity themselves, suggesting that the relationship between participant and observer is much closer than what we might have imagined. PT also shares similarities to how psychodramatists work in classical psychodrama (Holmes & Karp, 1991). PT encourages self-expression and dialogue and creates connections among people. Today, PT is used in a wide variety of fields, such as educational and social service institutions as well as therapeutic settings. PT also plays an important role in socio educational and educational institutions (Feldhendler, 2007). Feldhendler (2007) presents a practice-based research approach to using PT in his work in post-secondary education in HE in Germany, and he shows that action methods and active self-reflection can encourage students to develop autonomy and self-determination. This is very much considered to be a creative teaching innovation in HE.

In mainland China, PT is still in its infancy as a form of applied drama. However, Ma (2012) has carried out a pioneering exploratory and practical research project in PT as a form of innovative teaching and learning. It began at Beijing Normal University for graduate education in school counseling and mental health education. Now it is integrated into the IDBP also developed by Ma (Ma & Subbiondo, 2021), which is regarded as a psycho-pedagogical approach. IDBP organically integrates educational drama and therapeutic drama to develop participants’ self-transformation and self-integrity. The preliminary case study (Ma, 2012) of four students who participated in a

PT showed that they were gradually becoming more and more open, that free expression was useful as a method for venting their emotions, and that empathetic listening and participation in common experiences allowed them to feel greater personal connection. Additionally, they were more able to self-reflect using this PT approach. This discovery mirrors Feldhendler's (2007) research with undergraduate students who had more self-reflection in PT.

These four cases of positive reaction inspired Ma to further revise her teaching. She conducted a further action research project to explore the results of PT when it was offered throughout the semester, when all the graduate students in the course were immersed in PT. She wanted to know whether all the participants would have similar psychological emotional responses as the four previous examples mentioned in this study. If so, how did it increase their self-development and what mechanism actually assisted this? This study focuses on these questions.

Methodology

Data collection

The study included analysis of students' reflective diary entries. Ma planned 18 sessions over 6 weeks, with three 45-minute periods each week. The course structure included three parts in each section: literature study and group report for 45 minutes, PT action for 45 minutes, and review and discussion for 45 minutes (Table 1). Thirty-two graduate students majoring in school counseling and mental health education took part. They were two-year master's degree students in education who after completing their two-year study would become teachers.

In this PT course, Ma was the pilot, and the members of the Beijing Playback Theater Training Group were the actors. After every class, students wrote in their reflective diaries their feelings and thoughts at each moment during the PT session. Everyone's reflective diaries were collected at the end of the project. These 196 (32×6) reflective diary texts were the basis for the qualitative data for examining the teaching and learning process.

Data analysis

The 196 reflective diary texts were used for grounded theory analysis. This provided focused, abstract, conceptual theories that explains the studied empirical

TABLE 1 | Course Structure, Subject Content, and Duration

Course Structure	Subject Content	Duration
Literature study and group report	Reading and report with group on PT	45 minutes
PT action	Focus on the relationships of children/parents, teacher/students, and own relationship	45 minutes
Review and discussion	Focus on reflection on the PT action process: feeling, thought, and action	45 minutes

phenomena. Grounded theory research needs to code the data, which is a process of data conceptualization, categorization, determination of the core categories, and construction of the theoretical model. The coding is divided into three levels (Strauss & Corbin, 1990): The first level is open coding; it decomposes, examines, compares, conceptualizes, and classifies data. The basic steps include naming phenomena (with concept labels) and determining the properties and dimensions of the categories. The second level is axial coding; it recombines categories and subcategories by coding a paradigm model. The third level is selective coding; it systematically connects the core categories to its support categories, verifies the relationship, and complements categories that the concept has not yet developed. Based on the coding, we could clearly understand the effect of the PT on the students. Researchers suggested a psychological mediating model to explain the influences of PT on the students.

Results

There were 32 students involved in writing in the reflective diaries, and 25 students said that it was helpful to them. Two students stated that it had little effect on them, and five suggested it had no effect on them. By coding these texts of reflective diaries as qualitative data, it shows that the future teachers' self-development has three dimensions: self-orientation, other-orientation, and interaction (see Table 2).

Discussion

Values of the process of narrative

In Table 2, from self-orientation dimension, students showed more self-expression and self-awareness based on the process of the narrative or story.

Here and now, I want to renew my story with my parents in a new framework and with new perspective and experience, when I meet the past "me." Now I would not take my parents' expectations to copy over and pressure on my own shoulders like before. I accept their love, however I could not bear the way they love me, this is the respect for myself, but also the way to love them. (S5)

We see in S5 the development of self-subjectivity in a more positive direction. The new understanding and narration of their stories give the stories different meanings. This is the new experience and the reconstruction of an understanding of life.

Life stories do not simply reflect personality. They are personality, or more accurately, they are important parts of personality, along with other parts, like dispositional traits, goals, and values (McAdams & Manczak, 2015). Changing one's life story is at the heart of many forms of psychotherapy and counseling (Adler, 2012). Storytelling may be the most powerful form of self-transformation that we have ever invented (Gersie, 1992, Holmwood et al., 2022). PT enhances the storytelling experience through play and action and offers a powerful experience as an aid to human expression. To construct a narrative of one's past is one of humanity's innate skills. Just as Salas (1996) discusses

TABLE 2 | Code of Self-Development

		Illustrative remark
Code		
I	II	III
Self-orientation	Self-expression	Allows hidden stories to be spoken
	Self-awareness	Awareness of inner self value
Other-orientation	Other-awareness	Deep understanding of respect and empathy
		Being considerate
		Connection with others and community
Self-others interaction	Self-others connection	

It was the first time I was able to tell my deep personal feelings and affect others.

I began to realize that my life story deserved to be told and that these experiences had value.

PT is like a mirror; it provides me a chance to look at myself. It allows me to access my unknown self and have dialogue with it.

The performance of the actors accurately presented my emotions, feelings, and stories. I deeply understand true respect and empathy.

The PT let us jump out of our self-centeredness, and produce our own considerations.

The PT makes each person notice similar experiences we all share. It builds a platform for isolated individuals that lets them connect with others, by sharing the stories and their resonance. This allowed community connection to be built.

in his book *Improvising Real Life* that in life, there often appears neither rules nor direction.

Respect and empathy

In Table 2, from the self–others interaction, students show that they felt a deep understanding of respect and empathy. PT creates an atmosphere that can facilitate the sharing of students' own stories (Fox, 1999). For most students, it is the first time that their repressed and hidden inner feelings and stories were told in public and acted out by actors; thus, they felt heard, validated, seen, respected, and empathized within the group.

My story was respected, what I had seen was indeed my story! When I saw the actors presenting my story perfectly, I cried. (S1)

The storyteller initially thought that personal experience was dull, and it was just a very small fragment of his ordinary life; however, he also found that his own story was beautiful and precious: *my story is so moving! (S4)*

Rogers (1961, 1970) stated that the essence of empathy or empathetic understanding is listening. Empathy establishes a direct channel to actors and the tellers, and the tellers see themselves in the moment. Hearing their stories accurately told shows respect for the stories and the tellers' values. Students began to realize that their life stories have value, deepening their own sense of self belief.

In the PT, students appeared to show they were being considerate to others. They learn to respect each other's life experiences and life stories, and they tried to understand feeling and experiences from the perspective of others. Being respectful and empathetic is central to a future teacher's professional competencies, especially if training to be a school counselor or mental health education teacher. Further examples also suggest this.

Through sharing and discussion of stories, my childhood memories are revived, and I seem to realize a new self; The children I will face in the future may be similar to me in my childhood. The more I know myself, the better I understand others. (S23) I have also realized that to be a good school counselor, it is necessary to experience "empathy" firstly, with no empathy experiencing, it is very difficult to be empathic with others. What I gain in this course is not knowledge but inner growth. (S24)

Through the playback theater, I realized how "empathy" happened. I was moved by "respectful," "equal" and "inclusive" details. Although knowing the counseling theory cognitively, after learning and experiencing the playback theater, I really felt how to "respect," "love," and the feeling of being respected and loved. (S23)

Equality, respect, and inclusiveness in the field of the theater

From the dimension of self–others interaction in Table 2, students showed that they had more connection with others and their community. The field theory of learning (Lewin,

1942) has a concept of “life-space,” which is also called the psychological field. That field is the space in which the person moves psychologically. It contains the whole of one’s psychological reality—one’s self and what one thinks of or what one gains from one’s physical and social environment—an open, friendly environment in which trust is developed and is as essential in theater as it is in education.

In PT, the whole atmosphere of the field is equal, respectful, and inclusive. The value in the field is a basic attitude of caring and friendship for each other and respecting the confidentiality of the group. Through sharing, listening, and acting, there is interaction among the actors, audiences, and the tellers, in which there is a flowing warm support, and connection to all the people in the field.

Fox (2007) mentions, the “red thread”¹ that may take root in the empathetic process that occurs in PT. The sharing of individual differences does not isolate each individual, the stories have their inner connection, the participants can dialogue between them, and that is the primary function of the red thread in PT. Most of the stories they told had commonality. It involved peer relationship, teacher–student relationship, and parent–child relationship. The similar experiences promoted their mutual recognition and connection. *“I am not alone, our hearts are very close”* (S2). *“I found that we like a big tree, its branches split in different direction, however we still are united tightly around, it is difficult to separate”* (S31). Different experiences promoted mutual understanding and learning. Student A told the story of a conflict with her mother. Then, B told a story about how to deal with a conflict with his mother. Someone shared a sad love story, others shared a happy love story. Situations like this often happened. Thus, the stories that emerge in PT can be diverse and offer multiple perspectives, views, and experiences, helping individuals to acquire what they individually need from the PT experience.

Aesthetic Distance and Artistry of the Theater

Aesthetic distance

We shall now consider these mechanisms by understanding what the changes for each student were and what triggered their self-development. According to Boal’s (1995) concept of “spect-actor,” the teller keeps a certain psychological distance in watching the action, so that they can be fully objectively understood. Conversely, one student feels he could jump out of the scene and see the problems clearly. *“I was pulled out myself when watching the performance. When I was in or out the of the story, I was in two distinct cognitive states, and I suddenly saw my own irrational beliefs”* (S19). This is the aesthetic distance triggered by the storyteller’s self-reflection.

Jones (1997) suggests that empathy and distancing can be used as a way of keeping clients safe in a drama therapy context, and this idea of empathy and distance is central

¹ In PT, different stories seem to have an invisible thread that connects them and echoes each other, and this invisible thread is expressed in the metaphor of the “red thread.”

to drama therapy and psychodrama. Narrative story telling itself is a sharing process of one's own empathy and self-inner experience. Essentially, the "self" has a group of perceptions that allows self-reflection in the individual phenomenon of the field. There are also many perceptions that we cannot realize when looking closely at self. By using memory, restatement, and reconstruction, we can create some distance from an original event and PT can integrate this self-experience from an objective distance. McLean et al. (2007) suggests that young adults author a narrative sense of the self by telling stories about their experiences to others, monitoring this feedback from the telling, and editing of their stories in light of that feedback, thus creating some distance through which to examine it and gaining new experiences and telling stories about a new perspective. As they create stories that, in turn, create new and alternative aspects of self and personal understanding. For example, S5 said after the course that he used a new framework in his relationship with his parents. He no longer accepted all his parents' demands, and he gave himself room for growth.

Artistry of the theater

Aesthetics can be considered central to the healing medium. Aesthetic distance is a central focus in drama therapy (Jones, 2007). In the aesthetic space of theater, there are two dimensions: the affective and the oneiric. These two dimensions exist only within the mind of the subject. Memory and imagination project subjective dimensions on to—and into—the aesthetic space (Boal, 1995). Drama therapists create play spaces for their clients in which they can create aesthetic distance to create a safe space (Jones, 2007). Similarly, in PT, such unique techniques as sculpture, flows, pairs, tableau, three-sentence story, three-part story, etc., in which the actor's body is a powerful tool for aesthetic presentation are used. The embodied performance partners with imagination, and integrates sound, movement, music, and spoken word. All constitute the theater aesthetic elements of the PT. *"Art is everywhere, and the performance of the actors and musician show artistry. I think this artistic existence is a kind of beauty, so that we can accept the original self, and art is more conducive to emotional outpouring"*(S2).

In PT, the actors, pilot, and musicians reflect on the story and perform meaningful actions in the context of the art form. The concentration of the aesthetics gives clarity to the story and gives it context meaning and expression. Through this artistic expression, the character's challenges can be presented and the tellers and audience have chance to experience the creative and imaginative process. Coupled with the spontaneity of the PT they are offered the opportunity to take ownership of their own life situations and begin to grow and enhance their individual decision-making process. *"Their performances promoted healing, and everyone was moved when they saw their stories made into art by actors and they became gifts to themselves!"* (S13) The focus of the aesthetics of theater makes the story proof of its meaning and purpose.

Conclusion

PT provides the phenomenon field of self-development, by respectful "storytelling-performing-reflecting." Life can make us mentally fatigued, sad, or even depressed;

however, the performance of PT may release our innate creative ability to challenge these ways of being. In PT, the conductor leads the tellers in narrating the story of their individual life experiences, and the actors through the specific rituals of PT respect the story itself in its original telling, and they accept the effect of the teller as they playback the story. This gives the storyteller some perspective and distance on their own story when they see it acted out. The tellers and audience can feel the respectful, equal, and inclusive atmosphere in the field. When the tellers watch their stories represented and understood accurately, the teller experiences empathy. The tellers' emotion can be cathartic, through aesthetic distance, the original story and the presented story form a mirrored relationship. After an expression or cathartic moment, a change of reflective thinking can promote the tellers to integrate their experiences into the story, thus providing alternative narratives for the teller and the audience alike.

PT stimulates empathy, which become the intermediary of self-development. In telling the story and acting it out, empathy becomes an intermediary. Everyone might find a similarity that makes them connect a transformational moment. Therefore, the cognitive change brought about by individual reflection makes individuals have more respect and acceptance of each other and of their differing diversity. Witnessing PT promotes dialogue, acceptance, respect, and tolerance among the members of the community and promotes links between each other's experiences and provides support to the PT group as a collective.

Empathy may be the psychological mechanism of transformation and self-development in PT. The ceremony of the theater and the use of artistic performances and aesthetics, through the visual and artistic forms, can connect everyone's experience of their individual feelings and may open their own "emotional" door. This could be the external condition that inspires empathy and becomes the basis of empathic thinking. The accurate performance of the actors is the expression of respect; it knocks on the door where the teller and audience connect to this need to be collectively and individually understood. Meanwhile, the respect, equality, and inclusive attitude, which come from the actors, conductor, and audience, are the bases of empathy, although there might still be a few individuals whose empathy could not be stimulated easily. S19 was an example: *"I have always used my brain to analyze and my cognition to understand. It was difficult to connect my emotions with the storyteller. In the theater, it was hard for me to tell stories that I had deeply buried, especially the negative ones. I didn't move through the full tears in the theater. When the story was deep and sad, it was like my throat was being blocked in unbearable pain. I felt depressed, but it was difficult for me to shed tears. PT has the role of increasing and enhancing empathy. I thought I slowly developed the ability to empathize with others from initially being unaware of empathy to having some empathy. Of course, I still need more training."* The case of S19 shows that for the student who only uses the brain for analysis and judgement, PT has less impact on his empathy.

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