

# Research on the Application of Constructivism in Children's Drama Education

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**Abstract.** Children's drama teaching plays an important role in children's cognitive development. This paper uses the observation method to study Chinese children's drama education, which attaches importance to the presentation of performance results but neglects the cultivation of children's creative ability. Therefore, based on the constructivism viewpoint, this paper puts forward the optimization strategy of children's drama education. This article chooses *The Foolish Old Man, Who Removed the Mountains* as the script material, and specifically discusses how to make children participate in learning and creation in the process of choosing plays and rehearsing plays.

**Keywords:** Constructivism; Drama Education; Children's Drama.

## 1. Introduction

Placing issues related to human life states and existential situations on the theatrical stage, making them objects of common concern for all, and through observation and contemplation summarizing and reflecting on them, while enabling individuals to "review" their lives and thereby educating themselves, is the essence of theater [1]. Theater is not merely a performing art or a performance course. It is a form of self-education and cognition for people. As people's understanding of theater deepens, various forms such as educational theater and applied theater have emerged. Drama became a teaching method applied to different ages, fields, and scenes, and this transformation promoted the flourishing of educational drama, and children's drama.

Drama education enables children to enhance their awareness of themselves and the outside world in different drama situations, explore some social issues through strategies such as role-playing and teachers' involvement in drama, learn to think critically and solve problems, and then understand themselves and society [2]. Children develop creativity and imagination in role shaping and cultivate children's coordination and cooperation ability in improvisation to promote children's comprehensive and sustainable development. Children's drama plays an important role in developing, training, guiding and treating children's psychological behaviors such as interpersonal and social relations, personal and social value relations, and collective identity [3]. Dramatic performance creates a rich and three-dimensional language environment, and children constantly repeat-rich and interesting dramatic language, which can help them learn and master vocabulary, expand language vocabulary, and enhance language organization and useability. The setting of different scenes, the production of props, the production of costumes and headgear, and the makeup of roles can guide children to exert their imagination. In drama activities, children can learn to express the story or plot with body and language through cognition and feeling, and then learn, perceive, experience and imagine, which can effectively stimulate children's creativity.

However, drama education needs to respect the rules of children's cognitive development. This paper discusses the problems existing in Chinese children's drama education. Then, combined with Piaget's cognitive development theory, constructivism theory, literature method, and observation method to optimize the children's drama education strategy.

## 2. Basic Theory

### 2.1 Children's Cognitive Development Theory

Piaget (1896-1980) is a famous contemporary psychologist. Through his extensive observations and records of children's behaviors, he proposed that cognitive development is a constructive process,

which is realized in the continuous interaction between individuals and the environment [4]. In the process of children's cognition of the world, a structure is needed to promote the individual's intellectual organization and adaptation to the environment, which is called schema [5]. The process of children's schema renewal is a process of interaction between the individual and the surrounding environment, which involves assimilation and adaptation. Assimilation is the process by which an individual integrates information provided by external stimuli into his original cognitive structure. Assimilation cannot change the schema in the mind, but through the process of assimilation, individuals can adapt to new things based on their original cognition [6]. If a child encounters something new and cannot find a matching schema in his mind, he may recreate a new schema that accommodates the new object. Or change the existing schema, so that new things can conform to this schema, which is adaptation. Adaptation refers to the process which the cognitive structure of personality changes due to the influence of external stimuli, which is a qualitative change of cognitive structure. Through this theory, it can be found that Piaget mentioned the importance of original knowledge and experience. Cognition is a kind of construction activity that needs to give full play to the initiative, and this kind of active construction needs the subject's knowledge and experience as the basis. This is one of the core viewpoints of constructivism teaching theory.

The Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky also had a profound impact on the development of constructivism. He proposed that when an individual enters the social environment, they cease to be an isolated entity and instead engage in interactive activities with society, constantly undergoing a psychological process of self-reflection and adjustment [7]. This not only illustrates that the development of children's cognition occurs within social activities and practices but also emphasizes that knowledge resides in social activities and practices. Therefore, cooperative learning emerges as an important learning strategy. For educators, it is crucial to consistently motivate students to achieve a higher level of development. These studies laid the foundation for the development of constructivism.

## 2.2 Constructivism

Constructivism emphasizes that learning is an active process of meaning construction and social interaction. It includes the basic views of knowledge view, learning view and student view [8]. Knowledge view emphasizes the dynamic nature of knowledge, and knowledge is constantly developing [9]. When confronted with specific problems, it is necessary to recreate for specific situations. Although language symbols give a certain external form to knowledge, different understandings may arise due to different experience backgrounds of students. Knowledge view shows that knowledge is not a final conclusion, and the learning process needs to be constructed, analyzed and understood by students in combination with their own experience. It emphasizes the students' independence and criticality in the learning process. The concept of learning is a process in which learners actively construct their own knowledge experience through the interaction between people, objects and people under the social and cultural background, that is, through the two-way interaction between new experience and original knowledge experience, they enrich, enrich and transform their own knowledge experience [10]. In other words, the process of knowledge construction has three characteristics: active construction, social interaction, and situational. Active construction shows that students are not passive receivers of information. As Piaget said, new knowledge is absorbed and built on the basis of previously formed knowledge structures. New knowledge is constructed by transforming, organizing, and reorganizing old knowledge. Therefore, this theory emphasizes that students' previous experience should be used in teaching to link new knowledge with original knowledge experience, so as to enable learners to consolidate and update their knowledge system and construct new knowledge. Social interaction and situational means that learning requires communication, cooperation, exchange and support between children and teachers, peers, family members and other people, as well as interaction with social environment and social context. Student view emphasizes the richness and difference of student experience. Learners of all ages will accumulate experience of the objective world in different forms of learning, and the

accumulation of these experiences will make individuals different. Therefore, education should respect individual differences.

Based on the analysis of constructivism, this paper proposes that students should be the center in children's drama education, and children's autonomous learning ability should be brought into play, so that children can self-reflect and adjust. Teachers are students' guides, supporters, mentors and collaborators. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to students' existing experience and knowledge background, and use a variety of modern technologies to create situational teaching, increase the cooperation between children and different groups, promote the development of children's creative thinking, and cultivate

### **3. Current Situation of Chinese Children's Drama Education**

The extension of drama teaching to children shows the educational function of drama teaching and the importance of drama teaching to children's cognitive development. But there is such a phenomenon in Chinese children's drama teaching. Before the arrival of festivals such as Children's Day, teachers will organize children to have drama rehearsals, and teachers become the manipulators of drama rehearsals. The rehearsed script is selected by the teacher, the lines and dialogues are designed in advance by the teacher, and the children only need to speak the corresponding lines and add the corresponding actions during the performance. In this "performance-centered" theatrical activity, children are rehearsed over and over again under the guidance of teachers. In this teaching method, teachers control the performance process of children, sacrifice children's artistic sensibility and creativity, and do not have the composition of children's creations. Children's drama education has been reduced to "formal performance" teaching. From the constructivism point of view, this is not a process of active learning by the child, but of training in a highly controlled way by the teacher. This also runs counter to the "creativity" characteristic of educational drama, which pays more attention to children's memory of texts rather than inspiring children's critical and creative thinking [11].

It can be seen that Chinese children's drama teaching deviates from constructivism. Teachers occupy the main position in children's drama teaching, playing the role of command and control, rather than guiding and cooperating. Ignoring the process that children actively construct in the process of learning new knowledge. In addition, the teaching method of children's drama is also relatively simple and rigid, lacking situational teaching and interactive teaching, which cannot inspire children's cognition of different roles and stimulate children's creative talent. This paper argues that children's drama teaching should not only focus on the final drama performance but should pay more attention to the process of drama creation and pay attention to the process and interaction of drama teaching.

### **4. Research on the Application of Constructivism in Drama Education**

Children are natural performers. Through daily observation of children, it is found that children are very interested in drama activities. In the process of drama creation, design, organization and implementation, this paper puts forward some strategies to optimize children's drama teaching.

#### **4.1 Give Full Play to Children's Independent Learning Ability and Enable Children to Participate in the Learning and Creation of Drama**

Every child is an independent individual. Therefore, when selecting scripts, it is important to take into account children's cognitive levels and personality traits, providing room for development tailored to their diverse characters.

Piaget once pointed out that the preoperational stage of child development spans from ages 2 to 7. Children at this stage exhibit irreversible and rigid thinking characteristics [12]. In other words, they lack abstract thinking and reasoning abilities. Consequently, scripts suitable for linear narratives are

appropriate. Taking into consideration children's cognitive levels, as well as the principles of "cultural relevance," "educational value," "life-likeness," "openness," and "dramatic quality," this paper selects the traditional Chinese fable *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains* as the script material. Based on the progression of the story, which includes its occurrence, development, climax, and conclusion, it can be divided into the following plots: "The Foolish Old Man Decides to Remove the Mountains," "The Foolish Old Man and His Family Discuss Removing the Mountains," "The Wife Raises Doubts," "The Foolish Old Man Persists in Removing the Mountains and Is Mocked by the Wise Old Man," and "The Foolish Old Man's Persistence Moves the Gods, and the Mountains Are Removed." The main characters involved in "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" include: the Foolish Old Man, the Wise Old Man, the Foolish Old Man's Wife, the Foolish Old Man's Sons and Grandsons, the Son of the Neighboring Widow, the Mountain God, the Heavenly Emperor, and Kua. Before adapting "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" into a script, teachers should provide children with a detailed explanation of the story plot, allowing them to appreciate and feel the content of the story. This will stimulate divergent thinking and discussions, helping them understand the theme of the story. After the children have familiarized themselves with the plot, teachers can ask them which part of the story they are interested in and invite them to share their thoughts and feelings. During the sharing process, teachers can guide children in creating dialogues. For example, teachers can ask: "How did the Wise Old Man mock the Foolish Old Man? What did he say? What was his mocking expression like?" "When the Heavenly Emperor ordered the two sons of Kua to carry away the mountains, what did he say? What was his posture and tone like when giving orders?" By asking guiding questions, teachers can provoke children to think more deeply about the characters and plot, and also encourage them to combine their own life experiences when designing dialogues, lines, and body language. This not only motivates children's enthusiasm for participating in drama performances but also enriches their experiences with different characters. When assigning roles, children can choose which character they want to play and give reasons. Of course, role competition and role adjustment may occur during this process. However, competing for roles can exercise children's social skills and collaboration abilities.

After assigning the roles, teachers encourage children to express the characters in their proficient ways. Teachers can work with children to create props needed for the "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" play, such as "stones," "farming tools," "baskets and poles for moving mountains," and so on. This helps children understand the identities and life backgrounds of the story characters, and allows young children to engage in improvisational creation with the aid of these props.

#### **4.2 Focus on Students' Existing Experience and Knowledge Background During Drama Teaching**

The drama teaching process should be based on children's existing life experience and cognitive experience to carry out drama design. Therefore, this paper combs children's experience from the perspectives of cognitive experience, skill experience and emotional experience, as shown in Table 1. By understanding the experience of children, teachers can guide children to understand the characters in the script based on their own experience and be able to improvise. For instance, when depicting a rugged mountain path that is difficult to climb, teachers can encourage children to draw upon their own experiences of hiking and imagine their movements and expressions when they feel exhausted. This will prompt children to perform corresponding physical actions. When the Foolish Old Man discusses moving the mountains with his family, teachers can guide children to recall scenes from their family meetings, blending the situations in the script with children's life experiences, so that children can naturally use physical actions and language. Secondly, sorting through children's experiences can help teachers clarify their teaching objectives. Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" theory suggests that there are two levels of student development: one is the student's current level, which refers to the level of problem-solving they can achieve when acting independently; the other is the potential level of development that students may achieve, namely, the

potential gained through teaching. The difference between these two levels is the Zone of Proximal Development [13]. Teaching should focus on the immediate development area of students, provide students with content with difficulty, mobilize the enthusiasm of students, develop their potential, go beyond their immediate development area to reach the level of the next development stage, and then proceed to the development of the next development area on this basis. Based on the children's experience, the teaching goals proposed in this paper are divided into cognitive goals, skill goals and emotional goals. First, in terms of cognitive goals: 1) Children can understand the content and connotation of stories. 2) Understand the linear narrative strategy of drama including beginning, development, climax and ending. 3) Let children know that theatrical performance requires the creation of scripts, the design and production of props, scenes, costumes. Screenwriting requires defining themes, setting, plot, characters, conflict, narration, dialogue, body language, etc. Second, there are skill goals. 1) Can play children's imagination, so that children can create plots and dialogues. 2) Enable children to use richer body language, and coordinate the use of body movements and language to increase the authenticity and tension of the performance. 3) In the process of drama creation and rehearsal, learn to cooperate in division of labor, take the initiative to negotiate different ideas with peers, and actively cooperate with other roles. And according to the development of the plot, reasonable up and down the field, stand to the right position. In terms of emotion, children can love drama performances, dare to express themselves in public, empathize with different roles in The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains, and experience the psychological, emotional and behavioral changes of different roles. Finally, children can understand the spiritual core of not bowing to difficulties.

**Table 1. Children's Experience Review**

Empirical Dimension	Children already have experience	
Cognize	Theme	Children understand the theme of the story
	Role	Children know the names of the characters involved in the story, but do not yet fully understand the character characteristics and the relationships between the characters.
	Plot	Children have a rudimentary understanding of the plot.
	Script	Children do not understand the role and content of the script.
	Decoration	Through role-playing games, children gain exposure to headwear decorations, costumes, and props. However, they do not understand their functions.
	Stage Setting	Children have not set the stage and do not understand the role of stage setting.
Skill	Ability to Think and Imagine	Children have some understanding of the character's living environment Children do simple dialogue, expression design. But lack of experience in action design and plot creation.
	Imitation Ability	Children have experience in imitating animals and people.
	Stage Performance Ability	Children have experience in performing in literary and artistic activities but have no experience in performing on the theatrical stage.
Emotion	Interest	Children have a strong interest in role playing and dramatic performance.
	Attitude	Children have a more correct attitude towards activities and can actively complete activities.

### 4.3 Use Digital Media to Provide Teaching Context

Constructivism theory holds that knowledge is acquired through meaning construction in a certain context [14]. Therefore, the basic premise of constructivism scenario teaching is to create a learning situation conducive to meaning construction. Starting from the actual life of students, the teacher creates a situation closely related to the life of students, so that children can feel the role of the experience. Teachers can set up situations to make children understand the necessity of the foolish old man moving mountains. The foolish old man's wife was ill for many days, but because the road

was blocked by the mountains, the foolish old man's son had to go around to buy medicine and never returned. Setting up such a scene can make children, combined with their own experience of illness, understand the impact of mountains on people's lives, and why Yu Gong insists on moving mountains.

The creation of scenarios should also guide students to identify problems and spark their curiosity and desire for exploration. Teachers can arrange the desks and chairs to resemble two large mountains and draw a map on the classroom floor. The map should indicate the location of the Foolish Old Man's house, the position of the mountains (where the desks and chairs blocking the path are placed), and the scenery on the other side of the mountains. When the children follow the road signs to the position of the mountains, they will find their path blocked. At this point, the teacher can ask the children, "What should we do?" Some children may think of climbing over, some may think of going around, and some may think of moving the desks and chairs aside. The teacher can ask the children who propose moving the desks and chairs to try doing so, allowing them to experience the difficulty of the task. When the children cannot move the desks and chairs, the teacher can inspire them to think about what they should do when they cannot do it alone. This prompts the children to seek help from other children and work together to move the desks and chairs. Through such a scenario setting, children can understand the hardships faced by the Foolish Old Man in moving the mountains and learn the importance of mutual help and collaboration among friends.

In addition, teachers can also use multimedia and other ways to make children understand the story of Foolish Old Man Moving Mountains. Teachers can play the animated film *New Foolish Old Man Moving Mountains* so that children understand the story, but in the process of playing, teachers should pay attention to the inspiration of children. For example, "Is the mountain easy to move?" "Do you think Foolish Old Man will succeed?" "If you are a foolish man, how can you persuade your wife to move mountains?" Make children in the drama situation to create the plot and role dialogue, stimulate children's desire to perform and creative interest.

#### **4.4 Learning Drama in "Collaboration"**

The environment can have a positive or negative effect on children's learning and activities. The teaching of children's drama involves the interaction between teachers and children, and between children and children. Therefore, in the process of drama teaching, we should pay attention to the two-way communication and cooperative learning between teachers and students and children. Enable children to learn and perform step by step in information feedback and mutual cooperation, exercise children's insight and analytical power, and enable children to form an understanding of objective things and solutions to practical problems according to feedback information of their actions. Teachers should avoid teaching by verbal and simple, repetitive movements. In the process of drama teaching, teachers are not masters, but guides and collaborators. First of all, as far as the director is concerned, in the process of creating and adapting the script, there should be a reasonable "blank" to guide children to create their drama. Teachers should combine children's existing life experiences and guide children to design dialogues and body language. In terms of collaboration, Chen Renfu, a researcher from Taiwan, adopted the method of action research to propose educational drama strategies suitable for children: Teacher in Role, Hot Seating, Unfinished Material, Mantle of the Expert, Ole on the Wall, Mime, still picture, space construction, thought track and other dramatic strategies [15]. According to the plot characteristics of Yu Gong Yishan and the characteristics of children, this paper selects teachers to participate in the play, sit on the needle felt, improvise, and play the role strategy to carry out the performance teaching. The participation of teachers in drama means that teachers enter the drama situation, play a certain role, interact with children as a role, and naturally bring children into the drama situation [16]. The tactics of teacher in Role and Hot Seating can be used in the plot of wise old man refuting the foolish old man moving the mountain. The teacher wears the headdress of the wise old man and tells the children that when the teacher wears the headdress of the wise old man, the teacher is the wise old man, and when the teacher takes off the headdress, the teacher returns to being the teacher.

Teacher in Role (the Wise Old Man): I live in this village with the foolish old man. Everyone thinks I'm clever, so they call me the wise old man. Recently, I've been seeing the foolish old man's family running towards the other side of the mountain every day, and I'm not sure what he's up to every day. I should go and see what's happening.

Teacher (stepping out of role-playing): Kids, we just learned that the foolish old man and his family, have been working hard to move the mountain for a long time. But on this day, the respected old man in the village, the wise old man, went to visit them. Can you guess what he went there for? What do you think he would say to the foolish old man?

Children: The wise old man doesn't want the foolish old man to keep moving the mountain.

Teacher: Why does the wise old man want the foolish old man to give up moving the mountain? How would he say to the foolish old man?

Children's answers:

Teacher: How do you think the foolish old man would feel after hearing what the wise old man said?

Children's answers:

Teacher: So, what do you think the foolish old man would say to the wise old man? Would he give up moving the mountain?

Children's answers:

Teacher: And how do you think the wise old man would feel after hearing what the foolish old man said? What would he be thinking in his mind?

Children's answers:

The teacher employs the "Hot seating" strategy by inviting a child to sit on a chair and wear the headpiece of the wise old man, portraying him. The child will act out how the wise old man might feel and respond after hearing what the foolish old man has said. Through the teacher's role-playing strategy, the teacher guides the children to think about the inner thoughts of the wise old man upon hearing the foolish old man's words. Based on the children's responses, new plotlines and questions are generated.

Improvisation refers to the drama situation set by the kindergarten teacher, and the children improvise in the set situation according to their experience and understanding of the story. For example, preschool teachers create dramatic situations: if there is no help from God in the end, "What will you do?" Children play the role in the story to improvise the plot.

Role play is a game in which children enter the world of the role by means of imagination or pretense, and show the character, behavior, and characteristics of the role they play according to their understanding, observation and experience [16]. After children understand the theme of the story, they can hold a role-playing game of Who I want to be, causing children to imitate the role. One child plays the role, and the other children guess who it is? To understand the character, further familiar with the story. After the performance, children evaluate each other and compete with each other for roles, so that children are aware of how others understand the role, cultivate their understanding ability, and develop children's diversified and multi-angle cognition. In the process of collaborative learning, children imitate and learn from each other, develop their strengths and avoid their weaknesses, and cultivate their social communication ability and cooperation ability.

It can be seen that children's drama is taught in accordance with the process of story selection, screenplay adaptation, story sharing, prop production, role exploration, play creation, drama rehearsal, show performance, and so on. Teachers follow the spiral structure of "role-plot-dialogue" to guide children to create drama plots and lines [17], so that children can get familiar with the relevant elements of educational drama activities in the process of acting and creating. Through role imitation, impromptu play, dramatic games, and other ways, let children optimize lines and plots based on the main plot of the original story, guide children to enrich the story plot, and innovate roles, so that the performance is not confined to the story prototype, and give play to children's creativity and subjectivity.

## 5. Summary

Through the method of observation, this paper finds that there are formalistic problems in the script selection and drama rehearsal of Chinese children's drama teaching, such as teachers taking the lead and paying attention to the performance results, while ignoring the cultivation of children's learning ability, aesthetic ability and creative ability. Therefore, this paper puts forward constructivism as the theory to guide the development of children's drama teaching. This article chooses *The Foolish Old Man, Who Removed the Mountains* as the script material, and specifically discusses how to make children participate in learning and creation in the process of choosing plays and rehearsing plays. Teachers should use digital media and other means to make children understand the theme and plot of the story. And focus on children's known cognitive experience, life experience and performance experience in drama teaching. On this basis, it can guide students to reach a higher level of performance, enable children to have a deeper understanding of different roles, constantly improve children's cognition of performance, enable children to actively construct a cognitive system of performance, and promote children's thinking development. And give full play to the guiding role of teachers and the cooperative role of peers, through communication and comparison, children can self-reflect, form children's active learning, active reflection, actively adjustment of thinking and behavior habits, and promote children's all-round development.

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