Big Ideas from Little Characters: How Does the Dramatization of Children's Literature Embody the Value of Education

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Abstract. The dramatization of children's literature, as an important carrier of educational innovation, has emerged in response to the global demand for transforming education from knowledge spoon-feeding to whole-person education. This approach aims to cultivate children's multidimensional cognition from a diversified perspective through stage art, addressing three main challenges in the use of children's literature in primary English education, namely, the isolation of language learning from literary experience, the overemphasis on moral philosophy, and the narrow selection of teaching materials. This study proposes an innovative dramatization teaching method by utilizing a three-dimensional framework of "Text-Dramatization-Cognition" and conducting a case analysis of three classic works: "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat," Charlotte's Web, and "The Little Mermaid." Firstly, in the textual dimension, dramatization breaks the limitations of adult perspectives and gives children the subjectivity to appreciate literature. Secondly, in the dramatization dimension, dramatization transforms static texts into dynamic experiences and stimulates children's subjective interpretations through interactive reading, "Hot Seating," and "Image theatre." Lastly, in the cognitive dimension, dramatization fosters diversified perspectives, developing children's abilities of figurative and abstract thinking, and builds up the connection between the individual and society. This study not only enriches interdisciplinary research on children's literature and drama education but also provides dramatization teaching methods for children's literature educators, confirming that the dramatization of children's literature is a key medium for integrating educational development and social change.

Keywords: children's literature, the dramatization of children's literature, three-dimensional framework, teaching methods, the value of education

1. Introduction

Children's literature is vital to China's primary English education, acting as the primary tool to raise children's awareness of English, foster cross-cultural understanding, and boost their reading enthusiasm through simple language, lively stories, and rich cultural diversity. Currently, the text-telling method is the main teaching approach for incorporating children's literature in primary

school English lessons. Children are guided by teachers, who serve as the primary speakers, to develop their basic language skills and receive instruction.

Educational practice reveals three main issues with this teacher-centered, unidirectional teaching model, which relegates children to passive recipients: First, it isolates language learning from literary experience, emphasizing rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar at the expense of fostering independent literary appreciation, thus reducing English learning to a purely instrumental activity. Second, it prioritizes philosophical indoctrination, focusing on extracting morals and themes and restricting literature's function to ideological transmission, which causes students to view reading primarily as moral training and diminishes their interest. Third, the selection of teaching materials is shaped by adult perspectives that overlook children's cognitive development, leading to a failure to convey the original work's themes and adversely influencing children's value formation.

Therefore, it is particularly urgent to explore more effective pedagogical methods to bridge the current gap in integrating children's literature into English language teaching. In this context, the dramatization teaching method, with its qualities of context creation, role substitution, active participation and diversified expression, guides children to follow the basic storyline of a book and involve themselves through roles, which can effectively address the above three core issues, and ultimately enable children to walk into the world of reading with rich, parallel experiences and full of interest [1].

Based on the above, the study employs a three-dimensional framework titled "Text-Dramatization-Cognition." In the "Text" analysis section, it examines three works: "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat," Charlotte's Web, and "The Little Mermaid," serving as case studies to identify the shortcomings of current primary English teaching methods. Then, in the "Dramatization" section, the paper proposes two teaching methods centered on dramatization to address these issues. Finally, in the "Cognition" section, it further explores the educational value of dramatization practices, ranging from enhancing children's interest in reading to fostering their literary literacy and ultimately shaping their social cognition. Through this three-dimensional framework, the paper systematically illustrates how dramatization teaching methods can impart educational insights through "little characters," incorporate dramatization into primary English instruction, and fully leverage the educational value of children's literature.

2. The first section of the three-dimensional framework: text

In the field of primary school English teaching, children's literature, as an important teaching material, carries the dual role of language education and literary enlightenment. However, an in-depth analysis of the current teaching practice reveals that in the treatment of children's literature, the main problems are concentrated in the teaching process and teaching resources, which can be subdivided into three aspects: the separation of language learning and literary experience, the excessive inculcation of moral philosophy, and the improper selection of teaching content affecting children's value shaping. These problems seriously affect children's understanding and appreciation of literature, which in turn hinders the effective achievement of teaching goals. In the following, we will elaborate on these problems and the reasons for them with reference to three classic children's literature works: "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat," Charlotte's Web, and "The Little Mermaid."

Firstly, the current text-telling method from English teachers spoon-feeds students on the teaching of language skills, which is separated from literary experience. It fails to develop children's ability to appreciate and experience literary works spontaneously, resulting in their understanding of English learning remaining at the instrumental level. Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" is

a classic poem in children's literature. In English-speaking countries, many children love to read this poem, and even those who cannot read on their own like to have it read to them, although they are unfamiliar with the cranky words in the poem. However, in the process of teaching English in primary school, teachers' treatment of the poem is often biased: many teachers focus too much on explaining the vocabulary in the poem, such as "runcible" and "bong-tree" [2]. Many teachers focus too much on explaining the vocabulary in the poem, such as "runcible" and "bong-tree," and make adult assumptions about how a child might react to reading it, assuming that the child will not be able to read the poem unless he or she understands the vocabulary, and may even become frustrated and dislike the poem, and all poems for that matter. Indeed, many adult judgments about children's literature are based on such conjectures. Conjectures prompt teachers to readily conclude children's reading: how they read, how they think, what they like and do not like, and so on. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at correct conjectures, since they fail to recognize what is special about children's literature texts: the fact that the author has a child reader in mind when he or she creates the text, which leads to the concept of "Implied Reader," suggested by Wolfgang Isolde's theory of response. However, the teachers' focus on word recognition ignores this concept, failing to realize that the implied audience of The Owl and the Pussycat is someone who can appreciate strange words like "runcible" without getting annoyed at not knowing what they mean. In fact, no one is supposed to know what these out-of-the-way words really mean, and the only reason "runcible" is in the dictionary is because someone invented a strange spoon-like fork and named it "runcible" after Lill made it up and used it in the poem, but the lack of knowledge does not prevent children from enjoying the poem [3]. Therefore, if the teaching of children's literature focuses only on the instrumental aspect of language learning, it will not only kill children's interest in reading literary texts but may even be a misguided approach to language learning [4].

Secondly, the teaching goal of educators is overly focused on inculcating philosophy in children. Unlike the first problem, the second issue does not neglect the literary experience itself, but over-narrowing it to moral education, resulting in a singularization of the purpose of reading, which causes children to regard reading stories as a means of receiving moral training and gradually reduces their interest in reading. Take the classic children's novel Charlotte's Web as an example, in primary school English teaching, teachers usually focus on the theme and moral when explaining this work, believing that all children's stories are fables or should be read as fables, to extract a core educational theme to design the teaching process. For example, teachers always guide children to think about questions such as: "What can we learn from Charlotte's Web? What does this story teach us?" First of all, this kind of teaching approach of looking for a moral from the book is actually narrow, which can lead children to think that the theme of the story is only about friendship, and therefore ignore the more immediate pleasures of the text-the language, the life-like illustrations, the creation of endearing forms and structures, and thus the deeper categories of meaning that the text may hide. For instance, suppose Charlotte's Web is viewed as an allegory. In that case, it must be assumed that it is not a story about a piglet and a spider, but rather a story that exhorts the reader's behavior through the experiences of the piglet and the spider. Reading it this way may be motivating, but it tends more to confirm what the reader already knows than to provide new knowledge and enjoyment. Again, the book's plot of Charlotte the spider weaving a web can lead children from the imaginative stage to the symbolic stage: the words that Charlotte weaves into her web can suggest to children that all problems are solved through the written word, that is to say, by having the ability to express themselves in writing, clearly [5]. In addition, teaching children allegory too much can have the opposite of what is intended. Because the teacher determines that a particular story is language, then the presentation of the moral is very important as far as the content

of the moral is concerned, which reveals the reason why the moral or theme is often separated from the text that the reader associates with it. In search of a moral, teachers tend to impose on the text the ideas and values they have preconceived in their minds. This pedagogical goal of focusing on inculcating children with philosophies can prevent children from recognizing views and values different from their own.

Thirdly, teaching materials are narrowly chosen by teachers, since they overlook children's cognitive level, resulting in the teaching failing to convey the theme of the original work, which in turn affects the formation of children's values [6]. In the current English teaching of primary school, teachers commonly choose the best-selling adapted version of the story as reading materials, because it has a single plot, which is easy for children to understand; it also avoids the psychological impact on children with a comedic ending, and ultimately depicts the perspective of "truth, goodness, and beauty" of the society through the work for children. This practice seems to be caring for children's growth, but in fact, it underestimates children's ability to understand and empathize, and chooses to teach a version that oversimplifies the storyline and blocks out the "tragic" ending, which leads to children's misunderstandings when they start to come into contact with world literature, and even affects the formation of their overall values. Using Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" as an example, the story is deeply rooted in philosophical themes, centering on the little mermaid's quest to understand the meaning of life while seeking an immortal soul [7]. Instead, teachers tend to choose the Disney adaptations of this story as reading materials. These simplified versions of the story configures the main character with a set of supportive characters (for example, the witch, who turns from a helper into an antagonist, and three helpers: the crab, the fish, and the seagull), which leads to a shift from a character-centered to a plot-centered narrative that reinforces conflict and action, and makes it difficult for teachers to teach the story to the children directly. Conflict and action, allowing teachers to lead children directly to analyze superficial conflicts between characters rather than the complex inner conflicts of the little mermaid, as embodied in the original. And because the selection of materials is less inner portrayal of the characters (such as deleting the description of the little mermaid thinking about her "soul"), the teaching also dilutes all the elements of the cultural background, and the theme presented to the children is flattened into the main character's "the adventure toward love," which loses the philosophical connotations of Hans Christian Andersen's original work, and ultimately interferes with the children's ability to analyze the characters. The philosophical connotation of Andersen's original work is lost, which interferes with the children's understanding of the main idea of the original text and creates a gap and misunderstanding when they begin to contact world literature.

3. The second section of the three-dimensional framework: dramatization

Dramatization teaching methods, characterized by scenario construction, role-playing experiences, active participation, and diverse forms of expression, can effectively guide students in following the basic narrative structure of literary works and deepen their engagement through role immersion. This teaching practice is not equivalent to stage performance; its core lies in transforming static textual symbols into dynamic individual experiences through bodily perception, role immersion, and scenario reconstruction [8]. Addressing teaching challenges evident in the "text" dimension, dramatic methods offer a solution aimed at reconnecting children with literary texts. The following sections will explore how dramatic teaching can specifically address teaching challenges and stimulate children's reading interest, using the three aforementioned works as examples.

First, taking "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" as an example, the main teaching problem stems from teachers' excessive focus on obscure vocabulary, neglecting the core of poetry, the emotional

resonance created by rhythm and meter, rather than the isolated memorization of individual words. Dramatization methods, such as role-playing dialogues and rhythmic recitation, utilize interactive language expression and immersive experiences to guide students in naturally grasping the overall ambiance of the poem, transcending the tool-oriented language learning approach driven by exam-oriented goals. In practice, teachers can organize students into groups for role-playing, imitating the intonation of different characters in dialogue, and using body movements to perceive the rhythm of the verses. This multi-sensory recitation method helps shift students' attention from the literal meaning of words (such as "bong-tree") to the emotional atmosphere of the poetic scene (such as "the joy of marriage"). Once students have become familiar with the pronunciation rhythm of words like "runcible spoon" through repeated recitation, teachers can further guide them to understand the content of the poem and appreciate its rhythmic aesthetics. Dramatization methods allow children to achieve a deep resonance with the poem through rhythmic experience and contextual association, without needing to engage in adult-style semantic analysis.

Additionally, in the teaching classroom of Charlotte's Web, the teaching problem centers on the fact that some teachers tend to interpret the plot as a single moral, ignoring the children's space for independent exploration of the characters' emotions and plot suspense. This overly moralized interpretation makes students tend to look for "standard answers" rather than enter the inner world of the characters. In this regard, the "Hot Seating" teaching method is a teaching method that allows students to take on the role of the characters in the story and to be questioned by others, to increase their self-experience and experience of the story, and thus gain a deeper understanding of the logic of the characters' emotions and behaviors, which can effectively break the limitations of comprehension caused by overly moralized indoctrination. During English classes, the teacher can choose a student to play the role of Fern and interpret the words of Fern at the beginning of the story: "Where's Papa going with that ax?", said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast [9]. The teacher then led the students to use their knowledge sets to fill in the blanks for this sentence and analyze the plot design behind the text in a discussion. For example, the teacher can lead the students to ask questions of the playwright. First, students could ask the question, "Fern is called 'she,' so must she be a female character?" because in children's literature, "she" can also be a talking animal. Next, the question "What is the relationship between Fern and his mom?" can also be asked. The teacher can guide the actor to answer the question based on the textual analysis: because the tone of Fern's culture and the directness of his attitude imply an easy relationship between Fern and his mother, without being silent. In addition, some students may ask, "Why is there an axe?" Such a tool should not be present at breakfast moments, and its presence may cause students to think about its usual purpose, at which point the teacher can question and analyze with the students what role it would serve here in the context of the later text [3]. "Hot Seating" allows each participant to become an interpreter of the story, to bring himself or herself into the situation through dramatization, and to realize in questioning and responding that the joy of literature is diverse, that it does not stop at finding standard answers, but that it is just as much fun to discover the aesthetics of the layered construction of the plot, to feel the absorbing language of vivid images, and so on.

Furthermore, a common problem in teaching "The Little Mermaid" is that educators often choose to read and explain an oversimplified and adapted version of the story to children. This narrow selection of material leads to a one-sided understanding of the world's literature when children are introduced to it and can even influence the development of their overall values. To address this issue, "Image Theatre," a theater teaching method created by Augusto Boal that explores abstract issues and emotional conflicts through physical framing images, can effectively restore the story's

complexity and depth. It is well-suited for structuring texts with multiple layers of symbolism, such as "The Little Mermaid." Because it emphasizes non-verbal expression and collective interpretation, it can bypass the limitations of the simplified version, directly highlight the differences between the original and adapted core conflicts and value judgments, and actively encourage students to engage with the complete story. This approach helps guide students away from misunderstandings about values and toward a more nuanced perception of literature. In practice, teachers can guide students to dramatize scenes like the "Five Sisters handing daggers" and "The Hesitation of The Little Mermaid," emphasizing the urgency in her expression to highlight her motivation; or the struggle to lift the knife, with pain in her eyes to show the conflict between survival and moral choice. Another group can portray the "Light of the Soul" scene from the original story by slowly raising their arms to mimic a bubble, with the palm forming a halo to symbolize the daughter of the sky surrounded by light. Displaying these two sets of images side by side allows students to clearly understand the key difference between the utilitarian choice of "to live or not to live" in the simplified version and the spiritual transcendence of "physical death and eternal life of the soul" in the original. Through the use of "Image Theatre," children can actively read and understand the full story, engaging with the plot through dramatic interpretation, perceiving its true tragedy, and gaining clearer insight into life's choices and commitments. Ultimately, this method promotes the comprehensive development of their literary aesthetics and value judgment skills.

The core value of dramatization teaching lies in its effectiveness as a teaching method, which frees children from a passive role in learning and gives them the agency to interpret texts. Whether it is the rhythmic experience of poetry recitation or reconstructing meaning through physical modeling, all these practices share the same core idea: children's interactions with literature should be engaging dialogues, not lectures with fixed answers. When teaching methods are genuinely aligned with children's cognitive styles and emotional needs, the joy of reading will naturally emerge [10].

4. The third section of the three-dimensional framework: cognation

In the practice of text interpretation and dramatization teaching, subtle cognitive shifts subtly shape children's cognitive mode, which is not only related to individual growth but also has far-reaching significance for social development.

First, dramatization teaching breaks cognitive stereotypes and cultivates multiple perspectives. When children play the roles of Wilbur and Charlotte alternately in Charlotte's Web, they will gradually understand the different connotations of "fear" and "sacrifice." When they compare the shapes of the two versions of "The Little Mermaid" in the "Image Theater," they can intuitively perceive the difference between "survival" and "sacrifice." By comparing the two versions of "The Little Mermaid" in the "Image Theater," children can intuitively perceive the difference between the values of "survival" and "transcendence." This experience makes children realize that the world is not a black or white dichotomy, but full of possibilities for multiple interpretations [11]. The development of such cognitive skills lays the foundation for their future understanding of complex social phenomena and respect for cultural differences, and prevents them from falling into either-or fallacies.

Moreover, dramatized teaching promotes the common development of figurative thinking and abstract thinking. Children understand the rhythms of the poem through physical imitation of the owl's gait, and relay Charlotte's philosophy of life in everyday language in "Hot Seating," which realizes a natural transition from figurative experience to abstract cognition. Just as the absurd imagery of "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" was transformed into palpable joy through role-playing,

the abstract notion of "soul" became tangible in the shape of "The Little Mermaid." This kind of synergy is the core of individual learning ability, which enables children to maintain a keen sense of figurative things and the ability to refine abstract rules in their future knowledge acquisition. When children can think from the figurative to the abstract, it is easier for them to understand the complex connection between the individual and society.

Ultimately, dramatization teaching builds the cognitive connection of "individual-other-society." In group acting, children need to balance their own roles with the interactions of others, such as coordinating Wilbur's anxiety and Charlotte's calmness in Charlotte's Web. This group creation experience allows them to recognize that individual behavior is always situated within a network of social relationships. When children experience "helping others is the value of life" in their roles, they understand the abstract meaning of social responsibility in a figurative experience. This understanding will help them grow into empathetic and socially aware individuals, providing a spiritual foundation for building a mutual-help society [12].

From cognitive reshaping to social value cultivation, the dramatic teaching of children's literature ultimately points to the formation of a complete personality, allowing children to maintain their childish sensitivity and gradually build up a deep understanding of the world in their literary experience, which is the most precious fruit of education.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the educational innovation value of dramatization of children's literature through the three-dimensional framework of "text-interpretation-cognition." Aiming at the problems of language fragmentation, moral indoctrination, and distortion in traditional teaching, the dramatization takes the rhythmic experience of "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat," the character empathy of Charlotte's Web, and the value comparison of "The Little Mermaid" as the core path to achieve triple breakthroughs accordingly. Firstly, it remedies the cognitive bias of adults and respects the literary perceptual ability of children as implied readers; secondly, it avoids the limited moralizing view of educators, motivating children to find the pleasure of literature. Third, it shapes pluralistic thinking and social empathy at the cognitive level. Research has proved that "little characters" narrative (such as owls, piglets, and the little mermaid) are ideal carriers of great wisdom because of their proximity to children's psychology. Dramatization teaching not only rebuilds the dialogue between children and literature, but also promotes the development of whole-person education from the cognitive root, and provides children's literature educators with operable theoretical and practical solutions.

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