

THE ROLE POSITIONING OF PRIMARY SCHOOL DRAMA TEACHERS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CORE ARTISTIC LITERACY

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 7 November 2025 **Revised:** 21 November 2025 **Published:** 9 December 2025

ABSTRACT

Under the practical background of teaching oriented towards core artistic literacy, the role positioning of primary school drama education urgently needs to be re-examined. Based on qualitative research methods, combined with case studies and field observations, this article deeply explores the role positioning and practical transformation of primary school drama teachers in interdisciplinary teaching. Research has found that primary school drama teachers are gradually taking on three key roles: the first is the "guide of aesthetics and imagination", stimulating students' creativity and aesthetic perception through interdisciplinary artistic expression; Second, they are "supporters of innovative practice", flexibly switching between collaboration, evaluation and guidance to meet the diverse development needs of students. The third is "the trigger for critical thinking", which uses tense conflict situations to guide students to make value judgments and engage in social participation. Meanwhile, the research proposes four paths for the transformation of teachers' roles: from knowledge transmitters to learning guides, from controlling teachers to co-creative partners, from skills trainers to quality developers, and from professional art talents to interdisciplinary educators. The research conclusion has significant practical reference value for countries that are promoting core literacy education

Keywords: Core artistic literacy, Primary School Drama Education, Role Positioning of Drama teachers, Interdisciplinary Perspective

CITATION INFORMATION: Li, H., & Potiwetchakul, S. (2025). The Role Positioning of Primary School Drama Teachers from the Perspective of Core Artistic Literacy. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 3(12), 40.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, global shifts in educational philosophy have positioned competency-oriented learning at the forefront of arts education reform. In China, the 2022 National Standards for Compulsory Education in the Arts formally defined four core artistic competencies—“aesthetic perception, artistic expression, creative practice, and cultural understanding”—thereby calling on schools to move beyond rote skill acquisition toward the holistic cultivation of artistic literacy. This policy impetus has catalyzed the integration of drama pedagogy into the primary curriculum as a vehicle for interdisciplinary inquiry and creative thinking.

At the same time, the educational value of drama at the primary level has become increasingly prominent. Drama not only enhances students’ verbal fluency and collaborative abilities but also, through role-play and situational simulation, deepens emotional engagement and fosters socio-emotional development. At Ek Kai Primary School in the Beijing Economic-Technological Development Zone, affiliated with Renmin University, a six-week psychodrama project targeting students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity tendencies achieved significant results. Conducted in collaboration with three drama specialists and the school counselor, the project employed techniques such as role reversal, scenario reenactment, and forum theatre to encourage self-expression and peer interaction among five participating students. Follow-up interviews and behavioral observations revealed marked improvements in emotional awareness, impulse control, and classroom engagement, while teachers also reported notable gains in students’ social competence.

Despite these promising outcomes, the success of drama curricula hinges critically on teachers’ professional identities and competencies. Under a competency-oriented framework, primary drama educators must transcend the traditional “performance coach” role, adopting multifaceted identities as aesthetic guides, creative collaborators, cultural facilitators, and learning enablers. Yet many practitioners still confront insufficient instructional resources and lack the interdisciplinary integration skills required to actualize these roles.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines how competency-driven reforms are reshaping teacher roles in primary drama education. Grounded in the dual imperatives of policy and practice, it seeks to optimize role definition and professional development pathways, thereby offering both theoretical insights and practical recommendations to support the sustained advancement of drama pedagogy in primary schools—within China and in comparable international contexts such as Thailand.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

1) Core artistic literacy in arts curriculum reform

Core artistic literacy is becoming a central concept of recent arts curriculum reforms in China. Policy documents advocate moving from isolated skills training to the integrated development of students’ aesthetic experience, creative practice, and cultural understanding. Context: In this situation, Liu and Liu (2009) stated that school arts education must fit the new social needs by determining the new era and the route of development rather than following past ways of educating students. They think that the arts is a sort of education for learners and as such not only creates new learners but also renews the value of the art of being learned. Building on this policy orientation, Ning et al. (2025) view core literacy from a whole-person perspective. Proposing to make core literacy connect the cognitive dimension with aesthetic dimension, social dimension and personal dimension, and to be realized in classrooms as an integrated structure. From this point of view, the core artistic literacy is not simply the ability to enjoy works of art or to master skills and techniques, but a comprehensive ability to perceive, express and interpret the world in the form of art in a specific cultural context, as well as to link artistic activities to morality and social participation.

2) Core artistic literacy and drama teacher's role positioning

In the context of these reforms, the professional roles of primary school drama teachers are being redefined. Sun, Ge and Yu (2022) conducted a preliminary study on the core literacy of primary school drama teachers and proposed that the professional competencies of drama teachers include drama knowledge and skills, drama values orientation for students' overall development, and the ability to design and implement drama-based instruction based on core literacy. They find that the drama teacher can no longer be understood solely by how the students performed as this was a subject teachers concern. Starting with the most basic level of artistic literacy requirements, the drama teacher should move away from the performance coach role that focuses only on rehearsing scripts and polishing finished products, towards becoming a learner experience architect that produces the dramatic situation, leads learners in exploring its meaning and emotions, and helps them develop their own understandings. At the same time, the role of drama teachers is recognized to be a multifunctional teacher, that is, the organizer of classroom activities, the promoter of students' expressions, and the guide of values, rather than a single-function teacher.

3) Drama teacher roles, students' development, classroom ecology

Empirical classroom studies also show that the role positioning of drama teachers has a great influence on the learning of students and the classroom ecology. Ma (2022), focusing on educational drama for primary Chinese language teaching, notes that teachers are more likely to assume more open, experiential roles as they frame lessons with drama. It's not just a matter of explaining text in the form of lectures, it's about leading students into roles and situations, helping them explore these conflicts and emotions, and bridging those literary texts to their own lives. This change of the teachers' role helps students turn their fragmented knowledge of the language into more meaningful reading, speaking and thinking experiences. Similarly, the creation and practice of a psychological drama curriculum by Han et al. (2024), who found that when drama is used to solve students' emotional and interpersonal problems, teachers' roles are multifaceted. Teachers do not merely organize activities, but are also listeners, counselors, and co-participants. In so doing, they reshape the classroom rules, patterns of participation, and peer relationships, and create a more open and supportive classroom ecology where emotions are expressed and problems solved together. From a whole person perspective, (Ning et al., 2025) also stresses that the classroom practice should give students real opportunities to be agents, collaborators and reflective participants. This is echoed by the above findings and highlights how drama teachers' role positioning plays a crucial role in aligning the classroom ecology with the aims of the core artistic literacies.

4) Research gaps and research questions

In general, the existing studies provide important insights on core artistic literacy, the competence of drama teachers, and drama-based classroom practices, yet a number of gaps still exist. Many researches only concentrate on the discussion of macro level about the reform of arts education (Liu & Liu, 2009; Ning et al., 2025) or some special integration cases and projects experience (Ma, 2022; Han et al., 2024). Very few studies have systematically integrated core artistic literacy, the positioning of drama teachers, and the classroom ecology into one analytical framework. Although Sun et al. (2022) have outlined the core literacy structure for primary school drama teachers, there is still a lack of in-depth qualitative research exploring how drama teachers reconstruct their role in daily teaching with a core artistic literacy orientation, especially in the context of Chinese primary schools which are characterized by the interplay of examination cultures and interdisciplinary demands. Also, it often tends to point out the positives that drama-based curricula can bring and not enough on the tensions, constraints, negotiations teachers face when changing from a traditional "performance coach" type of identity to a multi faceted educator identity.

In response to these gaps, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How is core artistic literacy embodied in the design of primary school drama education curriculum and teaching practices?

RQ2: How does a core artistic literacy orientation affect the every-day role positioning of primary school drama teachers?

RQ3: What kind of role position is held by the primary school drama teacher to support the student's core artistic literacy and socioemotional development.

The research questions lead to the choice of the research methods, forming an organic structure to analyze the research results and discuss how core artistic literacy changes drama teachers' role positioning and classroom ecology.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, combining case study methodology and field observation to explore in depth the role positioning and practical transformation of primary school drama teachers in interdisciplinary teaching within the framework of core artistic competencies.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Based on in-depth field observations and multiple interviews, this study addresses the reconfiguration of primary school drama teachers' roles under a competency-oriented framework and yields the following key research findings:

1) The Practical Manifestation of Teachers' Multiple Roles

The author is a teacher at Ek Kai primary school affiliated with Ren Xun primary school in Jiangsu province and they are implementing a school-based drama curriculum based on the core artistic competencies. Longitudinal observation of one semester and follow-up interview showed that the drama teachers were no longer performing a single, static identity, but moved fluidly between a number of roles as different teaching goals and classroom situations required. Synthesis of the cases, three archetypal instances of practice can be identified: facilitator of aesthetic and imaginative engagement, supporter of creative practice and catalyst of critical thinking.

1.1) Facilitator of Aesthetic and Imaginative Engagement — the "Pioneering Player"

Core artistic competencies are at play, and drama teachers are no longer explaining ready-made meanings but are instead co-exploring an aesthetic, imaginative world with the students. For instance, in the lesson *Ode to a Goose*, the teacher first leads the students to listen, imagine and describe the colours, spaces, and feelings that the poem brings up, and then guides the students to turn these inner pictures into tableaux and short scenes. Rather than give standard interpretations, the teacher gives open-ended prompts and layered tasks (from class-wide chants to small-group work to voluntary performance), and makes flexible use of drama tools (voice, body, space) to ease students' anxiety and expand their expressions. Through these means, students experience drama as a means of seeing and making sense of the world, and the teacher is a "pioneering player" leading the class into a shared imaginative action.



Figure 1 Ode to a Goose

Note: The teacher guided students to transform the poem into a theatrical presentation using hand gestures, dance, and stop-motion animation, allowing them to experience the poetry and emotions embedded in the text. Students collaboratively constructed the drama scenes and engaged in the learning process.

Therefore, in the process of teaching practice, drama teachers are not only knowledge transmitters but also initiators of aesthetic voyages. This role is fulfilled through deliberately constructed sequences of activities, the redistribution of interpretive authority from teacher to the teacher-student collective, and the employment of rich sensory and imaginative cues, which are provided as concrete ways of implementing core artistic literacy.

Supporter of Creative Practice — the “Shifting Ensemble of Roles”

In drama classes, teachers have transitioned from being traditional directors with a single role. Instead, they continuously transition between micro-roles like script adapter, game designer, co-player, audience, and reflective commentator, creating a "dynamic ensemble of shifting roles." The crucial mechanism at play here is the progressive shift of creative responsibility from the teacher to the students. In psychodrama sessions designed for students facing emotional challenges or difficulties in peer relationships, the teacher first assists in clarifying scenarios and structuring plots, serving as a "safety anchor." Afterward, the teacher deliberately steps back to allow students to improvise dialogue, negotiate roles, and determine the direction of the story's progression. One drama instructor put it like this: “At first, I kept the narrative together, but eventually I figured out that I should get out of the way and let the kids take the wheel on the story.”. Then my job was to help them when they were stuck.



Figure 2 The Secret at the Lunch Table

Note: Teachers facilitate situational discussions and adaptation-based creation, guiding students to develop critical thinking skills and a sense of social responsibility.

In summary, primary school drama teachers gradually develop the teaching characteristic of a “shifting ensemble of roles” in practice. By flexibly assuming multiple identities, they provide personalized support and guidance to diverse student groups, promoting students’ artistic expression while advancing educational philosophies toward generativity and developmental orientation.

1.2) Catalyst for Critical Thinking — the “Anchor of Conflict”

Under the competency-oriented framework, the reconstruction of primary school drama teachers’ roles should move beyond the traditional identities of “performance skills instructors” or “script rehearsal organizers” and shift toward becoming deep facilitators who stimulate students’ critical thinking and social awareness. The role of the “Anchor of Conflict” is a key archetype in this transformation, emphasizing that teachers actively create tension-filled conflict scenarios that prompt students to critically reflect on perspectives, clarify values, and express judgments through role-play and situational experiences—thus fostering critical thinking and social responsibility.

The metaphor of “anchoring” originally refers to the act of a ship dropping its anchor to stabilize direction and prevent drifting. In a children’s drama classroom characterized by freedom, democracy, and dialogue, teachers act as “anchors,” casting “conflict anchors” with intentional problem awareness amid the turbulent sea of students’ diverse thoughts and clashing opinions. This enables students to momentarily “pause” amid opposing stances and emotional upheaval—to think, listen, and judge. Such “anchors” may arise naturally from conflicts among students (e.g., disagreements or opposing positions) or be deliberately created by teachers through designed questions and scenario setups to provoke cognitive challenges and internal reflection.

For instance, in the real case study “Secrets at the Lunch Table,” the teacher sets a conflict scenario around the topic of school bullying: classmates mock and exclude Xiao Yu’s eating habits and secretly bully him. Throughout the activity, the teacher repeatedly “drops anchors”: on one hand, students take on different roles such as Xiao Yu, the bully, and bystanders to experience multiple perspectives; on the other hand, the teacher introduces “reversal cards” during the performance (e.g., revealing the hardships of Xiao Yu’s family background), disrupting students’ initial judgments of the characters and triggering value uncertainty and reconstruction. Through a “role roundtable” discussion and the creation of adapted endings in a short play, students not only articulate their judgments about the incident but also develop a sense of agency regarding how to build a more inclusive and friendly classroom culture.

This role positioning and its practical application respond directly to the implementation needs of critical dimensions within core artistic competencies—namely “critical thinking,” “social participation,” and “cultural understanding.” It also provides primary drama teachers with clear action guidelines for future curriculum delivery. By guiding conflicts through an “anchoring” approach, teachers not only activate students’ empathy and cognitive abilities but also reshape the social significance of the drama classroom, making it a genuine educational space that fosters the co-development of cognition, emotion, and values.

2) Four Key Shifts in the Reconstruction of the Teacher's Role

Guided by an educational philosophy centered on core competencies and informed by the aforementioned cases, drama instructors at Ek Kai Primary School undergo four significant transformations in their professional role orientation. First, the teaching ecology evolves from being “instructor-centered” to adopting a “facilitator-collaborator” role: teachers transition from delivering lectures at the front of the classroom to joining students in immersive fictional worlds, restructuring spatial and temporal arrangements to foster iterative exploration and active engagement. Secondly, the power dynamics in the classroom are restructured from a model of “control” to one of “shared authorship and negotiated order.” Teachers deliberately provide open options in areas such as role allocation, interpretation, and rule-setting, enabling

students to collaboratively create scenes while ensuring fundamental safety and coherence. Third, the teaching objectives evolve from being a "skill trainer" to becoming a "developer of holistic qualities through an integrated art form." Success is redefined not merely in terms of polished performance but also in terms of students' engagement, their connection with real-life experiences, and their growth in confidence, imagination, and responsibility. In interdisciplinary units like "The Little Tadpoles Looking for Their Mother," drama serves as a bridge to connect language learning, scientific knowledge, and moral themes.



Figure 3 The Little Tadpoles Looking for Their Mother

Note: Teachers have shifted from skill trainers to quality developers, guiding students to create and interpret roles in interdisciplinary performances.

Fourth, professional boundaries extend from "arts specialist" to "comprehensive education professional". When drama is integrated into language education, moral education, and mental health education, drama teachers work closely with classroom teachers and counselors. They contribute their expertise in dramatic structure and play an active role in fostering a caring school culture. During interviews, several teachers mentioned that regular school-based lesson study meetings, collaborative planning sessions with Chinese language and mental health educators, and group reflections on classroom videos had "prompted us to reassess our role—not merely as orchestrators of performances, but as collaborators in fostering students' overall development." Collectively, these four transformations create a fresh framework for the professional identity of primary school drama teachers within the context of core artistic literacy. Role transition is demonstrated to be a continuous process, propelled by school-based curriculum innovation, classroom experimentation, and teachers' ongoing reflection, rather than a single, isolated change in job description.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Discussion

Based on field observation and multiple party interview, it shows that the reconstruction of the role of the primary school drama teacher is oriented towards core artistic literacy. Teachers in real classrooms are no longer just knowledge deliverers or stage directors. Instead, three important role forms are proposed: as facilitators of beauty and imagination, supporters of creativity, and catalysts of critical thinking. These roles make drama classroom become

important places for integrating aesthetic perception, creative practices and cultural knowledge, reflecting the general shift of art education from "skill-centered" to "competency-centered", and corresponding to the basic requirements put forward in Compulsory Education Art Curriculum Standards.

This study compared with existing researches on arts education and drama teaching, it further details the ways of role change. Previous research shows that the integration of drama in Chinese teaching or psychological education could make the students' experience richer and help them develop socioemotionally. Furthermore, the research findings of the current research show that the concrete ways in which drama teachers become more than transmitter, guide, controller, creator, trainer, developer, and specialist respectively. Three roles archetypes and four key shifts that I am proposing here give an operational model for understanding how core artistic literacy is made real in everyday teaching, rather than existing only at the level of policy talk or advocacy.

Challenges and complexities in role transition

Meanwhile, the data also reveal that the process of role transition is neither linear nor entirely seamless. Educators frequently encounter various limitations when attempting to embrace new responsibilities. First, institutional setups and time distribution impose actual constraints on what can be achieved. Drama classes are often overshadowed by the pressure of exams and the emphasis placed on subjects that are formally assessed. As one teacher remarked, "When exam season approaches, we have to either condense or incorporate drama into Chinese or moral education classes; otherwise, there simply isn't enough time." To adapt to such circumstances, teachers often need to align drama activities more closely with textbook material or test-related skills. While this approach helps meet curricular demands, it can also limit opportunities for open-ended exploration.

Secondly, the redefinition of roles is contingent upon teachers' individual professional resources as well as the level of support provided by the school. Many drama educators are still working on boosting their confidence in incorporating interdisciplinary approaches and addressing complex emotional matters within the context of psychodrama. Lacking adequate training, they might be reluctant to fully embrace the role of "conflict anchor" or to engage with sensitive subjects. Cross-disciplinary collaboration presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, some classroom teachers embrace drama as a valuable partner in language, moral, or mental health education. On the other hand, others view it merely as an "extra performance activity" and are hesitant to allocate time for joint planning. Consequently, drama teachers are frequently required to articulate and advocate for the educational significance of drama within the school setting.

Thirdly, the assessment system and parental expectations add extra layers of pressure. The results of drama education—like imagination, empathy, and social responsibility—are not easily captured by test scores or standardized metrics. Some parents are concerned that drama "takes time away" from academic studies. In reality, teachers frequently find themselves making compromises. For instance, they might highlight how drama can enhance reading comprehension, oral communication, or classroom unity. Additionally, they may carefully select topics that are less controversial and more readily embraced. As one teacher explained, "We understand that drama has the potential to explore deeper themes, but occasionally we need to modify the depth and subject matter to ensure parents and administrators are at ease." These challenges and tensions suggest that the redefinition of drama teachers' roles is an ongoing process of negotiation between ideals and realities. The concepts of the "pioneering player," the "shifting ensemble of roles," and the "anchor of conflict" represent more than just pedagogical ideals. They are dynamic positions that teachers continuously navigate toward or step away from, influenced by factors such as institutional limitations, the resources at their disposal, and their personal emotional reserves. Acknowledging these complexities enhances

the understanding of the findings and highlights that competency-focused reform in arts education is an ongoing, debated practice, rather than a straightforward success story.

Conclusion

This study indicates that under the background of educational reform oriented towards core competencies, the role of primary school drama teachers is shifting from a single skill transmitter to a diversified comprehensive educator, presenting three typical forms: "guides of aesthetics and imagination", "supporters of creative practice", and "triggers of critical thinking". And it evolves along four major turning paths: from a transmitter to a guide, from a controller to a co-creator, from a skills trainer to a quality developer, and from an art expert to an educational compound talent. This research not only deepens the systematic understanding of the role of drama teachers in the basic education stage in theory, but also provides operational references for curriculum design, teacher training and the construction of interdisciplinary collaboration mechanisms in practice. It has practical reference value for countries such as China and Thailand that promote core literacy education.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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