

# THREE-DIMENSIONAL DESIGN OF PRIMARY SCHOOL DRAMA CURRICULUM: FROM "SUBJECT INTEGRATION" TO "QUALITY INTEGRATION"

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## ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of global educational transformation and talent competition, China's curriculum reform urgently needs to shift from a "knowledge-oriented" approach to a "competency-oriented" one. This article, guided by core literacy, explores the role and value of drama courses in interdisciplinary teaching in response to the problem of subject fragmentation existing in primary school curricula. The research adopts the methods of literature analysis and action research, combined with real classroom practice, to construct a cross-disciplinary three-dimensional teaching model of "drama +". The research results show that this model not only realizes the integration of disciplinary knowledge, but also promotes the development of students' key abilities and core literacy. It reflects the transformation path of interdisciplinary drama courses from "disciplinary integration" to "literacy integration", providing practical samples and theoretical inspirations for the construction of competency-based courses.

**Keywords:** Primary school drama, Three-dimensional curriculum design, Disciplinary integration, Integration of literacy

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the world has witnessed a significant move toward competency-based education. Many countries have been reworking their curriculum objectives, content, and evaluation methods to emphasize essential competencies like critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication, moving away from a focus on isolated knowledge points. Curricula that are interdisciplinary and integrated with the arts are considered vital instruments for this reform. They empower students to apply knowledge from diverse fields to address complex, real-world problems.

In China, the 2022 Compulsory Education Art Curriculum Standards introduced the integration of four key aspects of core literacy: aesthetic perception, artistic expression, creative practice, and cultural understanding. These standards emphasize that art education should transcend mere skill development and concentrate on nurturing comprehensive literacy. However, in primary schools, drama courses are often confined to a single subject or regarded as supplementary activities, rather than being integrated into a broader interdisciplinary curriculum. The emphasis on cultivating students' higher-order thinking, social-emotional development, and personal agency is somewhat restricted.

This study introduces a model for primary school drama courses called "interdisciplinary three-dimensional design," which shifts the focus from "subject integration" to "quality integration." The concept of "three-dimensional design" involves the synthesis of knowledge, skills, and values or attitudes within an interdisciplinary structure. In this framework, these three elements collaborate to create a comprehensive and integrated learning experience. Students are doing more than just acquiring knowledge; they are also cultivating critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills.

As the research advanced, the three-dimensional model was further developed into a more comprehensive four-dimensional framework, encompassing cognitive, aesthetic, social, and personal growth. This extension expands on the original three-dimensional framework by placing a stronger and more explicit emphasis on social-emotional learning and personal development. The four-dimensional model offers a more profound and all-encompassing approach to student development. It focuses not only on academic progress but also on social and personal growth, underscoring the significance of holistic education.

This study focuses on constructing and evaluating a "drama +" interdisciplinary curriculum model. It is grounded in a comprehensive literature review and a one-semester action research project conducted at a primary school in China. The study aims to theoretically refine the concept of quality integration in drama education and establish a dialogue between this concept and existing notions of interdisciplinary curricula. In practice, it offers a localized illustration of drama serving as a core framework for competency-based learning within an Asian cultural context.

This study introduces an innovative teaching approach that combines three-dimensional design with four-dimensional integration. It emphasizes not only academic integration but also the social-emotional growth of students. This method seeks to offer practical guidance for implementing competency-based education in primary school drama and extend its application to broader interdisciplinary teaching practices.

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

### 1) Core Competency Reform and Interdisciplinary Curriculum

In China, the recent curriculum reform has transitioned from a knowledge-focused approach to a competency-driven model. This shift necessitates the reconfiguration of educational objectives, content, and evaluation methods, centering on core competencies rather than isolated knowledge fragments (Mao et al., 2025). Global frameworks for 21st-century skills and core competencies also emphasize the integration of cognitive, social, and intrapersonal

aspects of learning. Within this movement, curricula that are interdisciplinary and integrated with the arts are seen as vital tools. This is because they enable students to draw upon knowledge from various subjects to tackle real-world problems. Constructivist and social learning theories also propose that this integration becomes most impactful when learning takes place through inquiry, collaboration, and dialogue within meaningful contexts. The principles of universal design for learning, which emphasize providing multiple ways to engage, represent information, and express understanding, serve as a valuable framework for reimagining curriculum development to better accommodate diverse learners. Collectively, these perspectives offer the macro-level context for reassessing the objectives and framework of primary school drama programs.

## **2) From the Integration of Subjects to “Integration of Quality”**

Conventional "subject integration" usually entails merging content from different disciplines under a unified theme. However, this method frequently falls short in fostering deeper comprehension or advanced cognitive abilities. Ma (2024) suggests structuring teaching around core concepts and lasting understandings, which aids students in developing conceptual frameworks that can be applied across various contexts.

Expanding on this notion, the idea of "quality integration" arises as a progression of the three-dimensional model. In this enhanced model, the emphasis moves beyond merely integrating subject knowledge to fostering the harmonious and progressive development of students' cognitive abilities, aesthetic appreciation, social skills, and personal attributes over time. This model expands upon the three-dimensional framework by incorporating a clearer emphasis on social-emotional learning and personal development, both of which are essential elements for students' holistic growth. The four-dimensional model thereby integrates an extra dimension of comprehensive development, which corresponds to transformative learning, critical thinking, and social-emotional learning theories.

## **3) Drama Education as a Vehicle for Interdisciplinary and Quality-oriented Learning**

As a highly integrative art form, drama offers distinct advantages for interdisciplinary teaching in primary education. Through the integration of language, movement, imagery, sound, and space, drama establishes tangible scenarios where students can apply and adapt knowledge from subjects such as Chinese, science, music, art, and moral education. Studies on arts education within the core competency framework indicate that objectives should go beyond merely technical skills, encompassing aesthetic experiences, cultural comprehension, and values (Cui, 2025). Research on drama-based project learning has further demonstrated that when drama serves as the organizational framework for interdisciplinary projects, students tend to engage more actively, articulate their ideas more comprehensively, and establish stronger connections between classroom learning and real-world contexts (Chen, 2025). In theory, drama pedagogy can be understood as a practical application of constructivist and social learning theories. Activities such as role-taking, improvisation, and collaborative creation offer opportunities for negotiating meaning and developing shared narratives. Xie (2024) argues that interdisciplinary integration should enable students to become “real makers” who genuinely create and solve problems. The hands-on and collaborative essence of drama fits seamlessly with this maker-centered perspective, as students craft storylines, compose scripts, organize performances, and engage with feedback from their peers and audiences.

## **4) Summary and Research Gap**

Current research thus sheds light on the path for core competency reform (Mao et al., 2025), highlights the constraints of content-driven subject integration while emphasizing the necessity for deeper quality integration (Ma, 2024), and suggests that drama and interdisciplinary projects can foster artistic literacy and maker-oriented agency (Cui, 2025; Chen, 2025; Xie, 2024). However, several gaps remain. To begin with, there is an absence of systematic models demonstrating how drama can serve as a stable “drama +” framework within the primary

curriculum, rather than merely being implemented as sporadic activities or supplementary components. Secondly, only a limited number of studies clearly define the integration of quality or outline how drama courses can influence cognitive, aesthetic, social, and personal dimensions within a cohesive framework. Thirdly, the research literature on drama education and interdisciplinary curricula remains predominantly focused on Western examples. There is still insufficient theoretical development rooted in Asian classroom contexts, where norms and expectations related to authority, collaboration, and classroom discipline often vary significantly. In order to fill these gaps, the current study employs literature analysis, case analysis, and a one-semester action research project conducted in a Chinese public primary school. The aim is to construct and evaluate a three-dimensional “drama +” curriculum model. In doing so, it aims to engage the concept of quality integration in a dialogue with established drama education theories, while also contributing Asia-based evidence and reflections to the global discourse on competency-focused drama curricula.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In order to address these gaps, the study was structured as a two-phase project. During the initial phase, literature review and case analysis were conducted to define key concepts including core competencies, interdisciplinary curriculum, and quality integration. Additionally, the characteristics and limitations of existing drama-based interdisciplinary projects in primary schools were summarized. Based on this, a preliminary framework for "interdisciplinary three-dimensional design" was established. During the second phase, this framework was put into practice and continuously refined over the course of a one-semester classroom-based action research project conducted at a public primary school in China. In this project, the researcher took on the role of the drama teacher. The current paper primarily focuses on reporting the design and results of this second-phase action research. It also utilizes insights gained from the first-phase literature review and case analysis to interpret the findings.

### **1) Literature research method**

In the first phase, the study commenced with an extensive review of existing literature to lay a solid theoretical groundwork for the research. Policy documents like the Compulsory Education Art Curriculum Standards (2022), along with academic research on teaching guided by core competencies, interdisciplinary curricula, and drama education, were thoroughly analyzed and reviewed. This review sought to pinpoint key concepts, highlight gaps in existing research, and examine the limitations of current drama programs in primary schools. In this way, the literature review played a pivotal role in shaping the development of the “drama +” interdisciplinary curriculum model and guided the formulation of subsequent research phases. The insights gained from this phase helped to elucidate both the theoretical foundations and practical implications of incorporating drama into primary school education.

### **2) Case analysis method**

In the second phase, the study also carried out a case analysis of current drama programs and interdisciplinary projects in primary schools. This stage encompassed the gathering and examination of several illustrative cases, such as teaching plans, classroom video recordings, and teachers' reflective journals. The objective of the case analysis was to explore the current integration of drama into various subjects and assess how it contributes to the development of students' core competencies. The data were methodically examined to uncover patterns related to teaching methods, student involvement, and the incorporation of academic material.

The process of analyzing the case involved the following steps: First, the data collection process involved gathering existing teaching materials, lesson plans, and teacher feedback. Secondly, a content analysis was carried out to identify effective practices and shared challenges in incorporating drama into subjects such as Chinese, science, and art. Third, the cases were classified according to characteristics like curriculum objectives, levels of

engagement, and integration approaches. Ultimately, the insights gained from the case studies were consolidated to distill essential principles, which could then guide the design of the action research phase. The case analysis offered significant insights into both effective strategies and potential challenges for implementing the interdisciplinary drama model.

### **3) Action research method**

The second phase of the study focused on action research, implementing and refining the “drama +” interdisciplinary curriculum model. Action research adheres to the cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, enabling ongoing improvement grounded in classroom experiences.

During the planning stage, an interdisciplinary drama module was developed, incorporating elements from Chinese, science, and art to foster cognitive, aesthetic, social, and personal skills. The unit was created to promote both academic development and social-emotional progress.

The implementation phase consisted of introducing the unit to first- and second-grade students at a public primary school. Role-playing, script-writing, and group performances were employed to foster collaboration and stimulate creativity.

During the observation stage, data were gathered via classroom observations, student feedback, and video recordings of performances. The data provided insights into evaluating student engagement, participation levels, and the progression of essential skills.

During the reflection stage, the researcher examined the data and refined the curriculum according to the feedback and insights obtained from both teachers and students. The cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting was repeated throughout one semester, with each iteration contributing to the enhancement of the teaching model.

### **4) Classroom Practice and Data Collection**

Throughout the one-semester action research, the researcher actively engaged in the design and instruction of interdisciplinary drama courses while carrying out systematic field observations as part of the intervention. Data were gathered from a variety of sources, including classroom observation notes and video recordings, students' learning artifacts (such as scripts, stage designs, reflective writings, and performance outputs), teachers' reflective journals, and informal group discussions with students. These data were utilized to examine the teaching features of interdisciplinary drama courses, the developmental trajectories of students' core competencies, and the specific process through which the curriculum evolved from "subject integration" to "quality integration." To strengthen the validity and credibility of the findings, triangulation across various data sources and iterative reflection throughout action cycles were employed.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

This research is based on a one-semester action study. Through a systematic analysis of teaching practice, classroom observation, students' works and teachers' reflections, it deeply explores the teaching characteristics of the "drama +" interdisciplinary three-dimensional course, the generation path of students' core literacy and its transformation effects. The research results are as follows:

### **1) Teaching Characteristics of Interdisciplinary Drama Courses**

The interdisciplinary drama model was effective for promoting active participation of students and collaborative learning. The main feature of the model was that it used role-playing, creative expression and reflective practices to improve the development of students' critical thinking, creativity and communication skills. Activities let the students experience the academic content in real life and made abstract ideas into something that's easier for them to grasp. It is consistent with the constructivist learning theory, which posits that students learn best when they construct their own knowledge via experience.

However, these activities were also made possible by scaffolded learning. To build confidence and competencies, students worked through a series of exercises that gradually increased in difficulty, from simple role-plays to more complex group performances. The reflective activities were built into the activities that let the students look at what they had learned, see any problems they had, and get better. This continuous reflection loop also made students feel more in control of their own learning, a sense of agency and responsibility.

There were some difficulties during the process of carrying out the plan. Initial resistance from a few students towards the involvement of unfamiliar drama-based activities hampered their first attempt. Over time, the resistance fell as the teacher employed personalized scaffolding to assist students in becoming increasingly comfortable. It highlights how teachers need to be adaptable in creating a comfortable and friendly environment for learners to have the confidence to explore new things and take chances.



**Figure1** The performance of "Journey to the West"

Note: The performance of "Journey to the West" at the author's school.

Source: China National Children's Art Theatre Official Website (<https://www.cntc.org.cn/>)

## 2) Pathways for the Development of Core Competencies

The drama units helped the students to develop a number of key skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. Students were asked to do activities like come up with alternative endings for Journey to the West or create a drama around the science idea of plant growth to promote higher order thinking. These activities needed them to look at, put together, and figure out info, which helped them think critically. The Journey to the West unit particularly required the student not to only consume passively, but to be actively involved in the re-creation of the story; this was an undertaking that demanded both creation and thought. Moreover, the activities that were done collaboratively helped develop the students' ability to work together and communicate. In the Plant Growth project, for instance, students were working in groups on creating scripts and performances based on what they learned about plants. It required them to negotiate ideas, share the responsibility, and have a productive group discussion. The social - emotional skills of empathy, cooperation, and respect for different

views were all improved by these group sessions. It is in line with Social-Emotional learning theory, which states that it is important for students to create a cooperative and collaborative environment to build social skills.

But the development of those skills was not even among all the students. Some students, who had low self-esteem, were quiet, or shy to begin with, struggled with public speaking and group collaboration. For these students, it helped to start with scaffolded learning tasks that were lower risk and a little smaller in size, allowing them to gain some confidence and then slowly improve their collaborative and communication skills. So it's important because we're differentiating for every single person regardless of skill and confidence, they're all getting what they need from the model.



**Figure 2** Body movements

Note: A teacher guides students to simulate the growth process of plants with body movements.  
Source: China National Children's Art Theatre Official Website (<https://www.cntc.org.cn/>)

### 3) The transformation achievements from "subject integration" to "literacy integration"

The model was largely successful, but some challenges occurred when implementing it. One problem was that students were reluctant to participate in the unfamiliar drama based activities. Some students were unwilling to engage in role-plays and group performances because they thought these things weren't the same as the things that we do in class. To do this the teacher used something called one-to-one, so they got a student to start with little bit by bit parts of things before they got them all working together. This gradual approach made it easier for the students to gain confidence and to feel more comfortable in the learning environment.

Another challenge was to balance the academic contents with the drama activities. Take the Plant Growth unit as an example; it is difficult to ensure that students can truly understand the scientific concepts and then perform dramatically. Some students were more interested in the performance side, which sometimes resulted in not paying enough attention to the main scientific stuff. The challenge was to reinforce the academic content of the material via discussion and follow up on what they did in their dramatic content to the actual subject matter. The teacher had to be flexible and responsive to students' needs so as to ensure that the integration of academic content and drama was effective.

Also, classroom management was difficult during the more energetic group activities. Some classes had high energy, which led to a few disruptions that the teacher needed to adjust classroom rules and reiterate expectations for behavior. However there were some limitations to this model but it was still flexible enough to change to suit the need of the students and the teachers. Thus students have benefited from the learning process and the teachers as well.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

### Discussion

This research investigated the application of an interdisciplinary theatrical framework to enhance key competencies among elementary school students. The findings show that drama can successfully incorporate subject knowledge while also promoting critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. The key to its success lay in active participation and collaborative learning, which were enhanced through role-playing and creative tasks. These results not only align with previous research on the advantages of drama education (Cui, 2025; Chen, 2025) but also highlight the difficulties in striking a balance between drama activities and academic content, as well as handling classroom dynamics effectively.

The model's transition from subject integration to quality integration—emphasizing cognitive, aesthetic, social, and personal development—exemplifies an innovative approach to interdisciplinary education. This not only enhances the field of drama pedagogy but also pushes the boundaries of conventional teaching, particularly in primary education, where drama is frequently viewed as an add-on rather than a core component of the learning process.

### Conclusion

This research advances drama education and interdisciplinary curriculum development by proposing a three-dimensional framework that merges academic learning with the cultivation of core competencies. By emphasizing both academic learning and social-emotional growth, it offers a comprehensive approach to education.

The model places a strong emphasis on the integration of quality across multiple domains—cultivating cognitive, aesthetic, social, and personal competencies—and thereby provides a novel framework for enhancing curriculum design. This study underscores the potential of drama to connect academic knowledge with practical life skills, offering a solid groundwork for upcoming curriculum reforms.

Future studies might investigate the integration of drama with digital literacy and social-emotional learning to further boost student engagement and foster their development. Moreover, gaining insights into the role of cultural contexts in applying drama-based education can provide valuable perspectives on the model's adaptability across various educational systems.

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