

Constructing Pathways for Drama Therapy to Promote Urban Adaptation of Migrant Children: An Action Study Based on Community Y

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Abstract: *Urban adaptation is crucial for the social integration of migrant children; however, traditional intervention approaches have limitations in addressing emotional needs and promoting deep participation. This study aims to explore and construct an intervention pathway for migrant children's urban adaptation, centered on drama therapy and applicable to community settings. Based on the practice environment of Community Y, the study employed action research methods, conducting two rounds of spiral-style practice involving "planning-action-observation-reflection" with 30 migrant children. Data was collected through qualitative methods such as participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and drama diaries. The study identified and systematically elucidated a progressive pathway consisting of four core components: "establishing emotional security—reconstructing cognition—practicing skills—identity recognition." The formation process and preliminary application of this pathway demonstrate that drama therapy, through its unique experiential, expressive, and social aspects, provides an operable, compassionate, and widely applicable practical solution for addressing the challenges of urban adaptation for migrant children.*

Keywords: Drama therapy; Migrant children; Urban adaptation; Pathway construction; Action research.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the deepening of urbanization in China, the integration of migrant children into cities has become a key indicator for measuring social development. However, for these children, spatial migration is far from the end of integration. In unfamiliar urban environments, they often face confusion about cultural identity, fragmentation of social networks, and a lack of psychological belonging, falling into an adaptation dilemma of "physically in the city, but mentally far away." If these dilemmas are not effectively addressed, they will not only hinder their individual healthy development but may also sow the seeds of long-term social problems.

Faced with this real-world issue, academia and practitioners have developed various intervention models, including mental health counseling and school education support. While these methods have fundamental value, their limitations are becoming increasingly apparent: they often focus on correcting external behavior and imparting knowledge, failing to stimulate children's intrinsic emotional motivation, and neglecting to provide a sufficiently safe space for emotional expression and a embodied social skills practice environment. Therefore, there is an urgent need to explore an innovative intervention path that can deeply touch children's inner world and promote the coordinated development of cognition, emotion, and behavior through experience.

Drama therapy, as an important branch of expressive arts therapy, offers new possibilities for overcoming the aforementioned dilemmas. It constructs a transitional space that is both real and surreal through diverse forms such as improvisation, role-playing, and forum theater. Within this protected space, children can not only safely vent repressed emotions but also experience different social perspectives through role-playing, rehearsing coping strategies for real life, thereby achieving integrated development of self-awareness, emotional abilities, and social behavior. Its core value lies in transforming intervention from one-way "preaching" to two-way "experience," extending from isolated "individual psychology" to interactive "social situations," which highly aligns with the inherent requirements of the complex issue of urban adaptation for migrant children.

Despite the unique advantages that drama therapy demonstrates in theory, its application in the field of urban adaptation for migrant children in China is still in its infancy. Existing research largely consists of theoretical introductions or fragmented descriptions of practice, lacking a systematic analysis of intervention pathways, and even less so the use of action research as a methodology to dynamically construct and validate an operational practice plan through iterative cycles in real community settings. This research gap significantly limits the accumulation and dissemination of practical wisdom in drama therapy.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to systematically explore and construct a practical pathway for drama therapy to promote the urban adaptation of migrant children. Using Community Y, a typical high-mobility urban community, as the research site, and employing action research methods, the study conducted two rounds of iterative “planning-action-observation-reflection” practice with 30 migrant children. Through this process, the aim was to develop a logically clear, well-defined, and operational intervention pathway to fill gaps in existing research and provide concrete practical references for promoting the social integration of this group.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 Research Field and Subject

This study selected Community Y, located in the city center, as the research site. This community is characterized by high mobility, frequent tenant turnover, and fragile community networks. This dynamic demographic structure makes it difficult for migrant children residing there to establish stable peer relationships and social support networks. The study employed a combination of community referrals and voluntary participation, ultimately recruiting 30 migrant children aged 10-12 as research subjects. The sample included 16 boys and 14 girls, with an average urban residency time of 2.1 years. 68.3% of the children had experienced a change of residence or school within the past year.

2.2 Research Methods and Process

This study employed an action research paradigm, conducting a six-month practical exploration through a two-round cycle of “planning-action-observation-reflection.” The first round of intervention focused on establishing an activity foundation, designing an eight-week “Urban Stories” workshop. Through improvisational performances and role-playing, the workshop helped children develop a preliminary sense of belonging in the urban environment. Considering the high mobility of the community, the research team established a flexible participation mechanism, allowing new members to join gradually during the activities.

The second round of intervention, building on the experience gained from the first round, focused on improving the adaptability of the program. Specific improvements included: designing modular activity units to ensure effective participation for children joining at different times; developing a “city exploration” drama project to guide children in learning about urban resources through performance; and establishing a peer support system, where children who have been consistently involved help new members integrate into the activity group.

2.3 Data Collection and Processing

To comprehensively document the process of pathway construction, this study employed diverse qualitative data collection methods. These primarily included: participatory observation records, which detailed children’s behavior and interaction patterns during each workshop; semi-structured interviews, conducting in-depth interviews with children, parents, and community workers; children’s drama logs, collecting children’s experiences recorded in written and illustrative forms; and video recordings, documenting key activities for subsequent analysis.

All data was systematically coded and categorized, and core categories were extracted using thematic analysis. The analysis process emphasized cross-verification between data from different sources to ensure the credibility of the research findings. Simultaneously, the research team held regular discussions, conducting multiple rounds of data interpretation to continuously revise and improve their understanding of practical pathways.

2.4 Research Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adhered to academic ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participating children’s parents before the study began, and the children themselves were informed of the research objectives. During the study, pseudonyms were used to protect participant privacy, and all video materials were used solely for research analysis. Furthermore, an individual withdrawal mechanism was established, allowing participants to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. The research protocol passed the ethical review of the participants’ institutions.

3. INTERVENTION PRACTICE AND PATH CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

3.1 First Round of Intervention

The initial intervention focused on establishing a foundation of trust and exploring the applicability of drama therapy. In practice, we designed an eight-week “Urban Stories” workshop series, which focused on three modules: cultural awareness, social skills, and psychological identification.

In the cultural awareness module, we guide children to use physical actions to represent the differences between rural and urban life through the “Urban and Rural Life Scene Simulation” activity. For example, children are divided into groups to act out scenes of “busy farming season” and “city morning rush hour,” using comparison to help them understand the characteristics of urban life. In the “Understanding the Community” activity, children deepen their understanding of the rules governing urban community operations by role-playing different professions in the community, such as security guards, cleaners, and convenience store clerks.

The social skills module featured a key activity called “My Emotional Mini-Theater.” We created “emotion cards” covering common emotions such as happiness, anger, fear, and loneliness, allowing children to express these emotions through impromptu acting. This activity significantly improved children’s emotional awareness and expression abilities. One participating child wrote in their reflection journal: “Before, I would just hide when I was angry, but now I know I can express it through actions.”

The psychological identification module encourages children to express their personal experiences through drama via the “My Migration Story” activity. Initially, only a few children were willing to share, with most remaining silent and observing. Through observation and reflection, we adjusted our strategy in the third week, introducing a “progressive participation” approach, allowing children to gradually transition from supporting roles such as behind-the-scenes sound effects production and prop management to performing roles.

“Empty Chair Dialogue” activity in week six. Xiao Jun, a child from Henan, publicly shed tears for the first time while role-playing a scene of saying goodbye to his grandparents back home. This emotional breakthrough significantly changed the group atmosphere. In subsequent activities, children’s emotional expression noticeably increased, and their participation in role-playing also rose dramatically.

Through the first round of practice, we identified three areas for improvement: First, some activities were not closely aligned with children’s real-life experiences; for example, the pre-designed urban living scenarios differed significantly from children’s actual living environments. Second, the participation rate of introverted children remained low, requiring more targeted guidance strategies. Finally, the activity formats were relatively monotonous and failed to fully stimulate children’s creative expression. Based on these findings, we initially developed a preliminary pathway of “establishing emotional safety—initial cognition—simple interaction,” providing a clear direction for the second round of intervention.

3.2 Second Round of Intervention

Based on the experience gained in the first round, and in response to the three major problems identified in the first round of reflection—namely, content detached from real life, uneven participation, and monotonous format—the second round of intervention made the following targeted optimizations.

In the cultural awareness module, we added a “Community Facilities Exploration” activity. Children are led on field trips to places like supermarkets, libraries, and bus stops within the community, and then reenact scenes of using these facilities through drama. For example, children act out a scenario of “the first time riding the bus alone,” learning public transportation etiquette through role-playing. In the “Neighborhood Story Creation” activity, children create scripts based on real community events, such as “Clean Up the Hallway” and “Community Pet Agreement.” These relatable themes significantly increased children’s interest and engagement.

The social skills module employs a “progressive guidance” strategy, designing multi-level participation programs. For particularly introverted children, we offer low-pressure participation methods such as “shadow roles” (performing synchronized actions behind the main performer) and “voice-over narration.” Simultaneously, we introduce a “forum theater” model, where children experience the perspectives of both sides in a conflict and the mediator through role-playing in a “playground conflict mediation” scenario. Observational records show that

through this multi-perspective experience, children develop more complex social strategies, and their conflict resolution efficiency in real-life situations significantly improves.

The innovation of the psychological identification module is reflected in the “My City Story” monologue activity. We encourage children to adapt their personal experiences into 3-5 minute monologue plays. One participating child created “The Road from My Old Home to My New Home,” expressing their adaptation process by comparing the differences between their hometown fields and city parks, and between rural and urban schools. This narrative expression effectively promoted children’s understanding and acceptance of urban life.

Of particular note is the establishment of the “Drama Partner” system. We select children who perform well in the first round to serve as “Drama Partners,” and through training, enable them to assist new members in adapting to activities. This system not only alleviates the pressure on instructors but also cultivates children’s sense of responsibility and leadership.

Through two rounds of cyclical practice involving “planning-action-observation-reflection,” we gradually refined our intervention logic, ultimately constructing a four-stage intervention path: “establishing emotional safety—reconstructing cognition—practicing skills—identity recognition.” Each stage of this path is both independent and progressive, forming a complete intervention loop.

3.3 Core Content of the Four-Stage Intervention Path

The emotional security establishment phase focuses on building trust and creating a safe environment. We use systematic icebreaker games, such as “Trust Fall” and “Emotion Guessing Game,” to help children gradually build a sense of security. In group sharing sessions, we employ the “speaking scepter” rule to ensure that each child’s expression is respected and valued. Simple role-playing activities start with non-threatening themes, such as imitating animals or playing plants, allowing children to relax in a stress-free environment. This phase pays special attention to the participation of introverted children, reducing their psychological defenses through one-on-one guidance and group collaboration. Practice has shown that a solid foundation for emotional security is laid for subsequent interventions.

The cognitive restructuring stage focuses on addressing cultural barriers. Through comparative performances of urban and rural scenes, we help children objectively understand the differences between urban and rural cultures. In community-themed drama creation, children work in groups to research community characteristics and create scripts reflecting real community life. These activities effectively break down children’s unfamiliarity and prejudices towards the city, promoting their rational understanding and acceptance of urban culture.

The skills practice phase focuses on enhancing social skills. We designed a series of social situation training exercises, ranging from basic greetings to complex conflict resolution. In the “Conflict Resolution Forum Theater,” children face real-life social dilemmas, such as “What to do when someone gives you a nickname” or “Being rejected when you want to join a game,” exploring various solutions through role-playing. The “Collaborative Performance Workshop” requires children to create plays in groups, requiring close collaboration from scriptwriting to stage performance. These activities provide children with structured social practice scenarios, enabling them to learn important social skills such as communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution in a safe environment.

The identity recognition stage revolves around the construction of a sense of belonging. Through personal growth monologues, children systematically organize their urban life experiences, integrating fragmented adaptation experiences into a complete growth narrative. The “Collective Performance of Urban Memories” invites parents and community residents to watch, where children showcase their understanding and feelings about the city through theatrical performances. These activities not only help children transition from “outsiders” to “new city dwellers,” but more importantly, they establish an emotional connection with the city. After the performances, many parents reported a significant increase in their children’s sense of community and their increased willingness to participate in community activities.

4. CORE MECHANISMS AND PRACTICAL POINTS OF PATH CONSTRUCTION

The aforementioned studies presented four progressive stages of the intervention path, while the effectiveness of this path stems more deeply from a set of core mechanisms working in synergy behind it. The “stages” of the path

are the external processes and vehicles of intervention practice, while the “mechanisms” are the internal principles and driving forces that produce its effects. There is a profound correspondence and symbiotic relationship between the two: the “establishing emotional safety” stage creates the prerequisite for the initiation of the “emotional catharsis and group empathy mechanism”; the “cognitive reconstruction” stage is mainly achieved through the “embodied cognition and situational reconstruction mechanism”; the “skills practice” stage is the core training ground for the “social rehearsal and ability transfer mechanism”; and the final achievement of the “identity recognition” stage depends on the in-depth operation of the “narrative reconstruction and identity recognition mechanism.” The following sections will elaborate on these core mechanisms and their corresponding practical points.

4.1 The Core Mechanism of the Path

The effectiveness of the intervention pathway constructed in this study lies in the coherent and progressive logic underlying it. This logic primarily relies on the synergistic operation of the following four core mechanisms, which not only have a practical basis but also strong theoretical support.

4.1.1 Emotional catharsis and group empathy mechanisms

Drama therapy creates a “safe space” that provides a legitimate basis for children’s emotional expression. From a psychological perspective, this mechanism integrates the principle of “unconditional positive regard” in humanistic psychology with the element of “universality” in group therapy. Through activities such as “empty chair dialogue” and “emotional masks,” children can safely release negative emotions accumulated due to migration, discrimination, or loneliness. At the neuroscience level, such expressive activities can activate the brain’s mirror neuron system, promoting the formation of empathy. In our practice at Community Y, we observed that when a child expresses longing for their hometown in “reenacting a migration story,” other children with similar experiences naturally resonate, forming nonverbal emotional connections. This empathy not only alleviates individual emotional stress but also establishes strong emotional bonds within the group, laying the necessary psychological foundation for subsequent interventions.

4.1.2 Embodied cognition and context reconstruction mechanisms

The innovation of this mechanism lies in transforming abstract cognitive processes into concrete bodily experiences. From the perspective of embodied cognition theory, cognition does not only occur in the brain, but is a product of the interaction between the body, environment, and situation. This approach utilizes embodied forms such as role-playing and forum theater to transform abstract urban rules and cultural differences into perceptible and experiential dramatic situations. For example, in the “Conflict” forum theater, children personally experience the positions and logic of the conflicting parties through changes in body posture and tone of voice. This embodied participation breaks down their stereotypes and cognitive barriers about urban culture, achieving a cognitive leap from “observation” to “understanding.” It is noteworthy that this cognitive transformation is not achieved through preaching, but through active construction through hands-on experience, making it more profound and lasting.

4.1.3 Social rehearsal and ability transfer mechanism

The theatrical setting serves as a “social laboratory,” providing children with a unique environment for developing social skills. This mechanism is theoretically based on Bandura’s social learning theory and situated learning theory. In structured activities such as “conflict mediation theater” and “cooperative creative performance,” children can rehearse various social strategies in advance and learn to adjust based on immediate feedback from peers and facilitators. In our Y community practice, we designed progressive social challenges: from simple greeting scenarios to complex conflict resolution situations. This progressive design ensures that children always learn within their “zone of proximal development.” More importantly, through repeated practice in simulated scenarios, children gradually internalize their acquired communication, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities, and as their confidence grows, they can effectively transfer these skills to real-life school and community settings. Parental feedback confirms this: “My child now actively invites classmates over to play, something that has never happened before.”

4.1.4 Narrative Reconstruction and Identity Recognition Mechanisms

The core of this mechanism lies in helping children reinterpret their personal experiences and construct a positive self-identity. From the perspective of narrative psychology, individuals understand life and construct their self through storytelling. The pathway, through elements such as “solo performances” and “city story showcases,” guides children from passively receiving life experiences as “protagonists” to actively telling and interpreting their own stories as authors. In the practice of Community Y, we observed a typical transformation process: initially, the stories children told emphasized differences and barriers (“I am an outsider”). After intervention, they began to integrate fragmented experiences of urban and rural life, transforming the challenges of mobility into part of personal growth (“I have both rural experience and understanding of city life”). This narrative shift signifies the construction of a more proactive and coherent “new urbanite” identity, ultimately achieving a stable sense of psychological belonging.

4.2 Key Practical Points for Successful Implementation of the Path

To ensure the smooth operation of the above mechanisms in complex community practices, this study summarizes the following four key implementation points, all of which are derived from lessons learned in two rounds of action research.

4.2.1 Deep localization of content

The success of this approach does not rely on standardized activity scripts, but rather on its deep integration with local knowledge. In the first round of intervention, we used a pre-set urban life script, and children’s participation was only 65%. After reflection, in the second round of practice, we visited the community with the children, collected local stories, and incorporated the community’s physical environment (such as landmarks), cultural customs (such as local festivals), and children’s real-life experiences (such as school transfer stories) into the drama creation. This shift yielded significant results: participation increased to 92%, and children stated in their journals, “This is telling our own story.” This key point requires practitioners to be not only drama facilitators, but also discoverers and translators of community culture.

4.2.2 Flexible and differentiated forms

It is essential to respect the individual heterogeneity of children. In practice, we have found that uniform activity formats can lead to the withdrawal of some introverted children. Therefore, we designed a “progressive participation” ladder, allowing children to start with low-stress roles such as prop management and behind-the-scenes voice-over, gradually transitioning to group performances, and finally trying core roles. Simultaneously, based on Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, we provide differentiated participation methods for children with different traits: those with strong language skills are responsible for dialogue creation, while those with strong kinesthetic intelligence are responsible for action design. This differentiated strategy ensures that each child can develop at the edge of their comfort zone, rather than being forced to accept uniform participation standards.

4.2.3 The dynamic generative nature of the process

The pathway is not a static blueprint, but should continuously grow within the cycle of action research. In our practice at Community Y, we conduct weekly team reflections, flexibly adjusting the pace, content, and even goals of activities based on children’s immediate feedback, changes in group dynamics, and unexpected situations (such as member turnover). For example, when we find that children are particularly interested in a certain topic, we extend the activity time for that topic. This dynamic adaptability requires leaders to maintain a high degree of reflection and flexibility, which is key to the pathway’s vitality in a real, dynamic community environment.

4.2.4 System synergy of the field

Children’s transformation doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Bronfenbrenner’s ecosystem theory suggests that the long-term effectiveness of a pathway depends on building a supportive ecosystem. In practice, we proactively invite parents to participate in workshops, allowing them to understand the value of drama therapy through firsthand experience; we collaborate with community workers to provide venue and resource support; and we create opportunities for children’s theatrical achievements to be showcased to the community. This multi-layered collaboration between “children-family-community” not only provides children with a continuous supportive environment but also catalyzes small changes within the drama group into broader social integration. For example,

after community performances, local residents' perceptions of migrant children significantly improved, and the community atmosphere became more inclusive.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study, through action research, constructed a drama therapy intervention pathway consisting of four stages: “establishing emotional safety—cognitive reconstruction—skills practice—identity recognition.” This pathway, based on creating a safe environment, promotes cultural understanding through embodied cognition, enhances adaptability through social rehearsal, and ultimately achieves identity recognition through narrative reconstruction. The results show that this progressive intervention pathway effectively addresses multiple challenges faced by migrant children during urban adaptation, including emotional expression barriers, cultural cognitive gaps, insufficient social skills, and identity confusion.

The intervention pathway constructed in this study has significant practical value. Its modular design makes it highly adaptable, allowing for flexible adjustments based on the specific circumstances and resources of different communities. The activity format of drama therapy itself has a natural appeal to children, effectively enhancing participation and engagement. Furthermore, the pathway emphasizes the integrated utilization of community cultural resources, providing an operational working model for community-level services for migrant children. These characteristics make this pathway highly valuable for promoting the social integration of migrant children.

At the theoretical level, this study enriches the application paradigm of drama therapy in the field of services for migrant children through empirical practice. It clarifies the mechanism by which drama therapy promotes urban adaptation, revealing the transformation process from emotional catharsis to identity construction; proposes a community-based intervention concept, emphasizing the organic integration of professional services and community resources; and establishes a replicable four-stage intervention model, providing a systematic reference framework for practice in related fields. These theoretical innovations not only expand the application boundaries of drama therapy but also provide new perspectives for research on migrant children.

This study still has several limitations: the research sample is limited to only one community, and the universality of the approach needs to be further verified in different types of communities; the research period is relatively short, and the long-term sustainability of the intervention effect could not be tracked; in addition, the study mainly relies on qualitative methods, and future studies could combine quantitative research to conduct a more comprehensive effect evaluation.

Based on the above limitations, future research can continue to delve deeper in the following directions: First, expand the research field and test the adaptability of the approach in communities with different regions and cultural backgrounds; second, conduct follow-up studies to examine the long-term stability of the intervention effect; third, explore the possibility of digital drama therapy to meet the service needs in the post-pandemic era; and fourth, strengthen interdisciplinary cooperation, integrate perspectives from multiple disciplines such as social work, psychology, and education, and further improve the theoretical foundation and practical methods of the intervention approach.

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