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Drama as art, pedagogy and practice:

A practice-based framework for primary teachers

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Abstract

This paper introduces a practice-based drama framework developed in response to the evolving educational landscape in Ireland. Recent curricular reforms, including the redeveloped Primary Arts Curriculum (NCCA, 2025), have repositioned drama as a distinct art form while continuing to value its capacity for integration across learning areas. Drawing on the findings of Teachers Talking Drama (McEntee & Finneran, 2025) and grounded in qualitative research with primary teachers, the proposed framework addresses long-standing challenges around teacher confidence, clarity, and enactment. It offers a flexible, accessible model built on three interdependent pillars: drama as collaborative process, drama as a transdisciplinary tool, and drama as artistic practice. In doing so, it responds to teachers' desire for concrete strategies that are context-responsive and aligned with curriculum aims. The framework aims to reposition drama not as a marginal or enrichment activity, but as a foundational methodology that supports expressive, critical, and inclusive learning across the primary school.

1 Introduction and Context to the Framework: Insights from Teachers Talking Drama

This paper builds upon the findings of *Teachers Talking Drama* (McEntee & Finneran, 2025), which emerged from doctoral research exploring Irish primary teachers' perceptions and experiences of drama in the classroom (McEntee, 2024). Drawing on rich qualitative data, the study highlights the complex realities teachers navigate in bringing drama into their practice. Despite being part of the 1999 curriculum, where it was positioned as a process-oriented pedagogy to support holistic learning, drama continues to occupy an uncertain space in many schools—valued in theory, but often inconsistently applied in practice.

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The research identified a wide range of challenges that inhibit the effective implementation of drama. Teacher's spoke of a lack of confidence, particularly where their own experiences of drama in initial teacher education were limited or negative. Many described drama as something they would use only when they "had time," often relegating it to seasonal activities or special events. This perception reflects a wider policy context, particularly the impact of the Draft NCCA Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011), which contributed to a narrowing of curricular focus and reinforced hierarchies of subject legitimacy. Barriers such as timetable constraints, limited professional development, and uncertainty around assessment were also consistently cited. Crucially, the study found that drama was more likely to thrive in environments where institutional support existed—through leadership, collaborative planning, or whole-school valuing of the arts—rather than being reliant on individual enthusiasm alone (McEntee & Finneran, 2025).

One of the clearest findings from *Teachers Talking Drama* was the fragmented nature of drama provision across schools. Although present in the curriculum, drama is frequently treated as optional or peripheral. This variability of experience reinforces the need for a more embedded, sustainable approach. The research calls for a model of drama that is not an add-on, but a living, integrated practice woven into the fabric of teaching and learning.

In response to these findings, this paper proposes a drama framework for educational practice. Rooted in teachers' real-world experiences, the framework reimagines drama not as a static subject or a performance product, but as a flexible, relational pedagogy capable of responding to the needs of children and classrooms. Drama supports the development of core skills such as collaboration, empathy, communication, and imaginative thinking—skills that are explicitly valued and fostered in the redeveloped Irish Primary Arts Curriculum (NCCA, 2025).

The changing landscape of curriculum policy in Ireland further underscores the relevance of this framework. With the publication of the redeveloped Primary Arts Curriculum (NCCA, 2025), an integrated arts curriculum now guides the first four years of primary school recognising the importance of early exposure to multiple art forms—including drama, art, music, dance and digital media—as mutually reinforcing. This marks an expansion of earlier curricular aims, extending the process orientation of the 1999 curriculum by placing a renewed emphasis on drama as an aesthetic and performative art form. This deepened focus invites a reassessment of how drama is conceived and practiced in schools: not simply as a tool for cross-curricular integration, but as a creative discipline in its own right, grounded in performance, embodied exploration, and artistic intention (Nicholson, 2014). As Baldwin and Fleming (2003) note, attending to the aesthetic dimensions of drama enhances its educational

impact by fostering critical reflection, emotional engagement, and creative agency—further reinforcing the value of drama within an integrated arts framework.

The drama framework proposed here aligns with these curricular developments while remaining attentive to the classroom realities identified in the *Teachers Talking Drama* study. It supports the view that drama can function both as an expressive art form and a pedagogical mode of engagement. Most importantly, it offers a way to close the gap between curriculum aspiration and classroom enactment—bridging policy and practice in ways that are sustainable, inclusive, and grounded in the lived experience of teachers and children. This paper is structured in four parts. First, it contextualises the framework by tracing the evolution of drama education in Ireland and internationally. It then outlines the three core pillars of the proposed drama framework—collaboration, transdisciplinary, and artistic practice.

2 The Evolution of Drama Education and the Changing Landscape of Arts Education

Drama education is a dynamic and evolving field, widely understood as a process, a pedagogy, a product—or often, a blend of all three (NCCA, 2022). It can stand alone as an expressive art form or be integrated into other subjects. This hybridity, while a strength, also contributes to ambiguity around its purpose and implementation in schools. As O'Toole (1992) suggests, drama resists simple categorisation, occupying a space between spontaneity and structure, play and purpose.

At the heart of drama education lies storytelling. Drama uses stories not just as content, but as a method and organising principle—through character, narrative, and emotion, learners explore complex social, moral, and personal issues in imagined contexts. Importantly, these stories are often co-constructed and improvised in the moment, allowing students to shape, disrupt, and reinterpret narratives in response to group dynamics and thematic exploration. As Bruner (1991) notes, narrative is central to human meaning-making. Taylor (2000) and Nicholson (2014) similarly highlight the power of storytelling in drama to enable empathy, collaboration, and the construction of meaning through theatrical forms.

Over the past century, the field has been shaped by a range of influential theorists and practitioners, notably Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, and Cecily O'Neill. These pioneers collectively challenged earlier orientations that confined drama to the performance of one-off plays or superficial enactments of content—approaches that often marginalised meaning-making, improvisation, and the internal life of the child.

In response, Heathcote's "Mantle of the Expert" approach positioned students as active knowers and creative participants in learning, while Bolton (1992) reframed drama as a way

of knowing, not just performing. O'Neill (1995) advanced the concept of process drama, a form of co-constructed exploration without predetermined outcomes. These traditions foreground drama as an embodied, imaginative pedagogy capable of developing empathy, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

This process-oriented movement mirrored parallel developments in contemporary theatre practice, where devised, collaborative rehearsal processes gained traction over the direct performance of scripts. However, this necessary corrective—while pedagogically rich—has also led some to express concern that aesthetic and performative dimensions of drama can become underemphasised in educational settings. Neelands (2000) built on this tradition, advocating for a view of drama that is socially responsive and grounded in lived experience. His collaboration with Goode (2015) offers practical tools for educators seeking to structure dramatic inquiry in meaningful and creative ways. In this view, drama is not a luxury or a theatrical aside, but a necessary mode of expression and exploration for students and teachers alike.

It is within this complex lineage that both the redeveloped Primary Arts Curriculum (NCCA, 2025) and the current practice-based framework aim to intervene. Rather than presenting drama as either purely process-based or product-focused, both seek to rebalance the field by supporting teachers in incorporating the full spectrum of drama practice—including exploration, collaboration, and performance. In doing so, they affirm drama's dual identity as both a pedagogical strategy and a rigorous, expressive art form.

Ireland's experience with drama education reflects many of these global developments but also reveals unique tensions. Drama first appeared in the Irish primary curriculum through the 1971 *Curaclam na Bunscoile*, where it was acknowledged primarily as a pedagogical method. It was not until the 1999 Primary School Curriculum that drama was formally recognised as a subject, with clear aims grounded in process drama principles (NCCA, 1999). While this marked a significant step, in practice the implementation has been inconsistent. Teachers frequently report low confidence, lack of clarity, and time constraints as barriers to effective use of drama (McCoy, Smyth & Banks, 2012).

Recent policy developments signal a more comprehensive recognition of drama's value. The redeveloped Primary Arts Curriculum (NCCA, 2025) reaffirms drama as an art form in its own right, with distinct artistic processes and modes of expression. It also reflects broader global trends in integrated arts education that emphasise creativity, transdisciplinary learning, and child-centred pedagogy (Winner et al., 2013; ACARA, 2022). This shift moves drama from the periphery to the core of holistic learning, encouraging its use both as a creative pursuit and a strategy for curriculum integration.

International comparisons show similar trajectories. In Finland, the National Core Curriculum embeds transversal competencies such as creativity and cultural literacy throughout all subjects (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). Wales' Curriculum for Wales (2022) includes drama within its Expressive Arts Area of Learning and Experience, promoting experiential, cross-curricular learning. In the United States, the Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) formally includes the arts in a "well-rounded education." Australia's National Arts Curriculum places drama on equal footing with core subjects, emphasising inquiry and creative thinking (ACARA, 2022). Meanwhile, Singapore and South Korea have invested significantly in national strategies that include arts education as a way of fostering global competencies and student engagement (Kang & Kim, 2015; Ministry of Education Singapore, 2019).

However, across all these contexts, one consistent challenge remains: policy commitments to drama and the arts often outpace the support offered to teachers in practice. Limited training, uneven resources, and a crowded curriculum continue to undermine the implementation of drama education. In Ireland, despite the aspirational tone of recent curriculum reforms, teachers still report difficulty assessing drama's dual role as an artistic and pedagogical tool. My own research confirms these concerns, pointing to curriculum overload, insufficient professional development, and a lack of clear assessment frameworks as persistent barriers (McEntee, 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires more than just new policies—it calls for new frameworks that support teacher confidence and foster sustainable, high-quality practice. This article introduces such a framework, grounded in the conceptual legacy of Heathcote, O'Neill, and Neelands, but designed specifically for the Irish primary context. Drawing on Neelands et al.'s (1997) idea of "felt understanding," the proposed drama framework advocates for a relational, dynamic, and integrated approach to drama education. It positions drama as a method of inquiry, creativity, and meaning-making that can animate the curriculum and cultivate empathy, collaboration, and expression. Importantly, this approach reframes drama not as an occasional enrichment activity but as a vital, responsive pedagogy embedded in everyday classroom life. As education systems globally grapple with the demands of cross-curricular learning, student wellbeing, and the integration of new technologies such as AI, drama offers a powerful counterbalance—rooted in human connection, embodied understanding, and collective imagination.

3 Towards a Drama Framework

This article proposes a practice-based drama framework designed to respond directly to the challenges facing teachers in Irish primary schools. Informed by a case study with an

ethnographic focus (McEntee, 2024), this framework integrates both traditional and contemporary drama strategies, grounded in the understanding of drama as both an art form and a pedagogy.

Rather than treating drama as an isolated subject or occasional enrichment activity, the framework positions drama as a dynamic, multifaceted methodology—what Heathcote described as a "way of knowing" (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). In this conception, drama functions as a bridge between disciplines, enabling children to explore and express knowledge through action, imagination, and embodied learning. It allows teachers to meet curricular goals while nurturing collaboration, empathy, and creative expression—capacities that are central to the redeveloped Primary Arts Curriculum (NCCA, 2025).

While barriers such as limited confidence, lack of training, and the lack of institutional support persist (McEntee, 2024), the framework offers a structure that is accessible, adaptable, and rooted in teachers' lived realities. It also aligns with international efforts to reposition drama as central to education, not peripheral—an approach reflected in curricular shifts in countries such as Wales (Welsh Government, 2022) and Australia (ACARA, 2022).

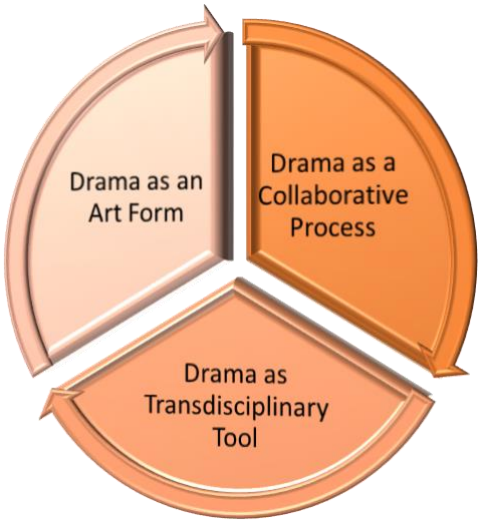

Figure 1: Drama Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the three interdependent pillars that underpin the proposed drama framework; Drama as a Collaborative Process, Drama as a Transdisciplinary Tool, and Drama as an Art Form — each contributing to a holistic, responsive model of teaching and learning. The first pillar, *Drama as a Collaborative Process*, positions drama as a shared endeavour, promoting co-construction of meaning through dialogue, co-planning, and reflective practice. At its core, the framework invites teachers to see drama not as a static method but as a flexible, context-responsive pedagogy that adapts to classroom needs while maintaining its artistic and educational integrity. The second pillar, *Drama as a Transdisciplinary Tool*,

highlights drama's power to integrate with other subjects. Teachers can bring curriculum content to life in ways that engage the imagination and deepen understanding—an approach aligned with international research on arts integration and cross-curricular learning (Abbs, 2003; Winner et al., 2013). Finally, the third pillar, *Drama as an Art Form*, affirms drama's identity as a creative art form. It encourages aesthetic exploration through performance, role-play, improvisation, mime, story-telling etc. Together, these pillars support the integration of drama across the curriculum, enabling teachers to engage with drama not as an optional add-on, but as a foundational mode of teaching and learning.

3.1 Drama as a Collaborative Process

Building on findings from *Teachers Talking Drama* (McEntee & Finneran, 2025), which identified teachers' lack of confidence and structural support as key barriers to implementing drama, this section explores how artist–teacher initiatives can actively support the drama framework. Positioned as one of the framework's central pillars—collaborative process—these partnerships provide meaningful pathways to embed drama as both artistic practice and pedagogical strategy. Several recent initiatives have responded to these challenges by enhancing teacher confidence and promoting creative collaboration. However, they also raise important questions around sustainability, teacher agency, and equitable access.

3.1.1 Teacher Artist Partnership

The Teacher–Artist Partnership (TAP) initiative offers a model of co-teaching where educators and professional artists collaborate to co-plan and co-deliver arts-based learning experiences. Rather than placing the artist in a delivery role, TAP emphasises joint ownership, reflective practice, and shared learning, aligning with the drama framework's collaborative ethos. Teachers in McEntee's (2024) study noted that professional development embedded in real classroom contexts was the most effective form of CPD. TAP's practice-based approach addresses this directly, allowing teachers to observe, trial, and adapt drama strategies with the guidance of an artist.

As Kenny and Morrissey (2016) point out, when structured effectively, TAP empowers teachers to incorporate artistic strategies beyond the life of the residency, building lasting capacity. Teachers acquire practical tools that can be readily adapted across curricular areas. This positions drama not as an occasional add-on, but as a regular, integrated feature of classroom life. The approach resonates strongly with the pedagogical strategy pillar of the framework, reinforcing the idea that drama methods can be used flexibly to meet curriculum goals.

However, successful partnerships depend on mutual trust, shared planning time, and clear communication. Without this, TAP projects may falter, particularly when artists' methodologies diverge from established school practices. Educators in both Irish and international contexts have expressed concerns about short-term collaborations leading to temporary impact (Burnaford et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2007). The depth of engagement depends largely on the degree of reciprocal professional development offered. Where CPD is fragmented or rushed, teachers may lack the confidence to continue using the methods independently. This highlights the need for structural support beyond the life of the partnership—an issue echoed in McEntee's (2024) data, where teachers valued drama but struggled to sustain practice without embedded supports.

Comparable models abroad, such as Australia's Creative Partnerships and the USA's Arts Integration Model, have similarly demonstrated the potential of teacher–artist collaboration. However, these too have highlighted challenges in scaling impact without systemic backing (UNESCO, 2006; Ewing, 2010). Embedding such collaborations within a wider drama framework—one that recognises both artistic process and pedagogical function—ensures that these partnerships are not isolated experiences, but part of a longer-term cultural shift in school practice.

3.1.2 Creative Schools, Creative Clusters, and BLAST

Ireland's broader creative education landscape has expanded significantly in recent years, particularly through initiatives like Creative Schools, Creative Clusters, and BLAST. These programmes aim to position creativity at the centre of school life, aligning strongly with the goals of the Drama Framework—particularly the artistic practice and collaborative process pillars.

Creative Schools, led by the Arts Council Ireland and supported by the Department of Education, enables schools to develop bespoke arts-in-education plans tailored to their context. The initiative supports schools to integrate creativity more systematically and is rooted in student voice and cross-sector collaboration. This shift away from one-off workshops toward longer-term planning reflects the drama framework's emphasis on sustainability and integration, encouraging schools to view drama as a core aspect of holistic education rather than a discretionary extra.

However, the impact of Creative Schools is often limited by schools' capacity to engage meaningfully with the planning process. Research by Fahy and Kenny (2021) and Christophersen (2013) indicates that while funding and access to creative associates are highly valued, reflective practice and long-term implementation can be constrained by teacher workload and time pressures. These concerns mirror findings from McEntee (2024), in which

teachers expressed a desire for collaborative planning but identified timetabling and school culture as persistent barriers.

Creative Clusters, also part of the Creative Youth Plan, take a broader approach by encouraging groups of schools to collaborate on creative projects. This model fosters community-based engagement, resource sharing, and professional dialogue. Such collaboration reflects international models, including Australia's use of cluster teaching in rural areas (Ewing, 2010), and the UK's Creative Partnerships programme (Wood, 2014). The model complements the drama framework's collaborative process pillar by embedding drama and other arts within a shared learning network, which can lead to stronger institutional commitment and whole-school arts cultures.

Nevertheless, disparities in expertise and resources across schools can result in inconsistent outcomes. Morrissey (2023) notes that without targeted professional development and sustained support, such collaborations risk becoming uneven. Additionally, the time required for genuine cross-school collaboration must be acknowledged—particularly in a system already strained by competing demands. For these initiatives to meaningfully support drama education, they must be situated within a clear pedagogical framework that acknowledges teacher needs and provides accessible entry points.

BLAST (Bringing Live Arts to Students and Teachers) represents a different model, focused on short-term residencies. Since 2021, BLAST has brought hundreds of artists into classrooms annually (Department of Education, 2021), providing immersive arts experiences that expose both students and teachers to professional arts practice. BLAST contributes meaningfully to the artistic dimension of classroom life and can be a powerful spark for engagement.

However, its short duration poses challenges for long-term teacher learning. Research by Creech et al. (2014) and Kenny and Morrissey (2021) underscores that teacher–artist partnerships yield the most impact when accompanied by follow-up, co-reflection, and embedded CPD. As the Drama Framework proposes, transformation happens not through exposure alone, but through sustained, relational learning that links external expertise with teacher agency.

3.1.3 Strengthening the Drama Framework Through Artist Partnerships

When considered together, initiatives such as TAP, Creative Schools, Creative Clusters, and BLAST play an essential role in embedding and sustaining the Drama Framework within primary education. These programmes not only respond to teachers' professional development needs but also bring artistic expertise directly into the classroom, enriching the learning experience for students and teachers alike. In doing so, they reinforce the framework's three core pillars: *Drama as Artistic Practice*, by connecting classrooms with the

practices and insights of skilled artists; *Drama as Transdisciplinary Tool*, by enabling integrated, hands-on methodologies across subject areas; and *Drama as Collaborative Process*, by fostering co-planning, shared learning, and reflective dialogue between educators and artists.

Importantly, any future model must also acknowledge the growing expertise of teachers themselves—many of whom have engaged in postgraduate and specialist arts education programmes now offered by Irish ITE institutions. These evolving pathways, alongside generalist arts modules, represent a significant shift in professional capacity and should inform the development of more reciprocal, artist–teacher relationships.

Crucially, these initiatives also help dismantle longstanding silos—between subjects, between schools, and between the education and cultural sectors—creating conditions for more connected, creative, and context-responsive teaching. When supported by a clear and coherent framework, artist–teacher partnerships offer more than short-term enrichment: they become a vehicle for meaningful curricular transformation. To realise this potential, however, sustained investment, structural support, and accessible, practice-based frameworks are essential to ensure long-term impact and equity of access across all schools.

4 Drama as a Transdisciplinary Tool

The evolving landscape of education necessitates innovative approaches that transcend traditional subject boundaries, fostering holistic learning experiences that prepare students for the complexities of the modern world. Drama, as both an art form and a pedagogical tool, inherently supports such transdisciplinary education by promoting creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration. Integrating drama across various disciplines not only enriches the learning environment but also aligns with educational imperatives that highlight the role of formative experiences in shaping the future of children (NCCA, 2020, p. 2). This growing emphasis on transdisciplinary education builds on the integration orientation already present in previous curricula and emerges from the recognition that addressing multifaceted global challenges—ranging from health crises to environmental degradation—requires frameworks that encourage interconnected thinking and imaginative problem-solving (Burnard et al., 2022, p. 166).Drama enables this by offering students embodied experiences, narrative inquiry, and collaborative exploration.

4.1 Defining Transdisciplinarity

Transdisciplinarity involves practices that extend beyond the confines of traditional disciplines, focusing instead on real-world problems through evolving methodologies and

collaboration (Russell et al., 2008). Frameworks like STEM and its expansion into STEAM (including the Arts) exemplify this approach, fostering comprehensive understanding and innovation. Within such contexts, drama enhances learning across diverse subject areas—bringing history to life through role-play, animating scientific inquiry through narrative, or visualising mathematical concepts through movement and performance.

Emerging international research underscores drama's relevance in STEAM and AI-enhanced education. Kasbary and Máté Novák (2024) explore how drama-based activities can be meaningfully integrated into STEAM education, highlighting the potential of embodied and creative approaches to enhance interdisciplinary learning, while Xiong & Son (2025) documented how dance-based activities integrated science and expressive arts in Chinese kindergartens. Ding (2024) explored how drama combined with AI tools and picture books in English language education promoted critical media and AI literacy. Meanwhile, Ma et al. (2025) developed CO-OPERA, a collaborative writing tool using generative AI that supports drama-based co-authorship, enhancing narrative skills and cross-curricular creativity. These developments highlight drama's continued adaptability and relevance in an increasingly digital educational landscape.

Drama's inherent characteristics make it a powerful transdisciplinary catalyst by encouraging collaboration, critical thinking, empathy, and imagination. Burnard et al. (2022) introduce the concept of "diffraction" as a methodological and pedagogical approach to blending disciplines—aptly reflected in drama's fusion of aesthetic practice and experiential learning (p. 170). When embedded in thematic or inquiry-based curricula, drama enables students to co-construct knowledge, reflect on alternative perspectives, and imagine new solutions. Neelands et al. (1993) assert that humanity has always sought to integrate knowledge to make sense of the world, suggesting that drama's role in education is both natural and essential (p. 13). By embracing drama within a transdisciplinary framework, educators can create rich, engaging learning experiences that not only impart knowledge but also equip students with the skills and dispositions necessary for active, informed citizenship in a rapidly changing world.

In the Irish context, integrating drama with the Primary Language Curriculum supports oral language development through playful learning experiences (NCCA, 2019). Research highlights the power of role-play in fostering communicative confidence (Cregan, 2012; Nguyen, 2017; Lin, 2015) and its impact on public speaking and vocabulary acquisition (Zyoud, 2010; Hasim et al., 2023). Similarly, in literacy and EAL (English as an Additional Language) contexts, embodied storytelling and process drama have proven valuable for enhancing comprehension and engagement (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; O'Toole, 1992; Wagner, 1998; Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Piazzoli, 2018).

Drama's transdisciplinary applications extend into STEM and history as well. Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert situates students as "experts" in real-world tasks, facilitating deep learning through fictional contexts (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). Role-play transforms history from static content into lived experience (Farmer, 2011; Smith & Herring, 1993), while mathematics and science gain new life through dramatic exploration (Masoum et al., 2013). As Greenwood (2013) and Drake and Reid (2018) argue, integrating digital and creative literacies is increasingly essential in modern education—and drama is uniquely positioned to serve that integration.

By embracing drama as a transdisciplinary tool, teachers can enrich the curriculum with emotionally resonant, cognitively demanding, and socially responsive learning. In doing so, they prepare students not only for exams but for empathetic, imaginative engagement with the world. The final pillar of the drama framework recognises, celebrates, and focuses on drama as an art form.

5 Drama as an Art Form

Drama is first and foremost an art form. The redeveloped Primary Arts Curriculum in Ireland recognises children as art-makers, emphasising their right to create, perform, and respond to the world around them through artistic processes (NCCA, 2025). The curriculum is structured around three interconnected strands—Creating and Exploring, Performing and Presenting, and Responding and Connecting—each reinforcing the artistic, cognitive, and affective dimensions of drama. In the early years, an integrated arts approach is promoted, highlighting the power of play and imagination as essential components of children's learning and expression.

The importance of honouring drama's artistic status has been widely discussed in recent scholarship. Nicholson (2022), for example, warns against reducing applied drama to a purely instrumental tool and argues for reasserting its aesthetic foundations. Frydman and Mayor (2023) similarly highlight the embodied and aesthetic dimensions of drama in early childhood education, while Vettraino and Linds (2010) emphasise its "transformative potential" rooted in co-created aesthetic experiences and collective meaning-making, particularly when working with marginalised youth. Together, these perspectives reinforce the view that drama's artistic integrity must not be overshadowed by pedagogical or therapeutic applications. As schools adopt more transdisciplinary and arts-integrated models, retaining this artistic focus becomes critical—not only to preserve drama's identity as an art form, but also to support imagination, empathy, and creative agency.

Within this context, it is essential not to overlook traditional drama art forms. Mime, dance, puppetry, and improvisation are time-honoured practices that continue to offer significant educational benefits while retaining their intrinsic artistic value. These conventions are also compatible with transdisciplinary approaches and cater to a wide range of learning styles, making them accessible and meaningful for diverse learners (Abbs, 2003).

Research shows that many of these forms are underused in Irish classrooms despite their dual pedagogical and aesthetic potential (McEntee and Finneran, 2025). Mime, for example, is a powerful form of embodied storytelling that uses gesture and movement to convey narrative and emotion. It can engage reluctant or shy students, particularly due to its reliance on non-verbal communication (Athiemoolam, 2013). Improvisation fosters spontaneity, creativity, and resilience; when used meaningfully in schools, it cultivates collaboration, active listening, and adaptability—skills prioritised in 21st-century education (Mæland & Espeland, 2017). Puppetry offers a distinctive blend of visual art, storytelling, and live performance. Beyond its developmental benefits—such as improved communication, problem-solving, and social interaction (Råde, 2021)—it holds significant aesthetic value as a multisensory art form. Puppetry fosters verbal and non-verbal communication, emotional expression, and social development (Nguyen et al., 2020; Simon et al., 2023). It also promotes inclusion by offering a safe, symbolic outlet for students who may struggle with direct self-expression (Kröger & Nupponen, 2019).

These approaches align strongly with the 2025 Primary Arts Curriculum, which not only values drama for its pedagogical versatility but also recognises its artistic essence. The drama concepts—such as plot, role and character, tension, time, place/space, sound, and movement—provide the building blocks for exploring narrative, identity, and emotion. Engaging with these elements enables children to perform, reflect, and connect—ensuring that drama supports all three strands of the curriculum in meaningful ways.

Finally, the role of external artists and theatre practitioners further reinforces drama's artistic practice while strengthening the framework's collaborative process pillar. National initiatives such as Teacher–Artist Partnership (TAP), BLAST, and Creative Schools provide invaluable opportunities for schools to connect with professional artists, exposing children to authentic arts practices and supporting teachers in building confidence and skills (Kenny & Morrissey, 2021). These collaborations also model co-planning, skill-sharing, and creative dialogue. When aligned with a clear drama framework—one that integrates artistic, pedagogical, and collaborative dimensions—these creative practices offer teachers structured yet flexible ways to reimagine drama in the classroom.

Ultimately, drama is not simply a teaching method; it is a living art form that embraces diverse expressive modes. Through creating, performing, and connecting, students are invited to embody roles, tell stories, and discover meaning with imagination and authenticity.

6 Conclusion

This paper has argued that drama must be re-centred in Irish primary education—not as a marginal or auxiliary subject, but as a vital, expressive, and pedagogically powerful art form. The proposed drama framework responds to this call by offering a research-informed, practice-based model grounded in classroom realities and aligned with current curriculum reform. It recognises drama's capacity to foster imagination, communication, empathy, and transdisciplinary learning—qualities essential to 21st-century education.

By foregrounding three interdependent pillars—drama as a collaborative process, drama as a transdisciplinary practice, and drama as an art form—the framework supports teachers in navigating systemic challenges and developing greater confidence in their teaching. It moves beyond idealistic visions of arts education by offering tangible, sustainable strategies that are both artistically rich and practically feasible.

Ultimately, drama education is not just about content or delivery—it is about creating space for children to make meaning, take risks, and tell stories. When supported by clear structures, creative partnerships, and strong curricular foundations, teachers can reclaim drama as both a professional tool and an artistic opportunity. The drama framework thus offers not only a pathway for implementation, but a vision for embedding drama as a vibrant, enduring presence in Irish primary schools—where children's voices, ideas, and experiences are brought to life through the transformative power of the arts.

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