

Rethinking Drama Education in Higher Education: A Critical Analysis of Its Potential for Enhancing Psychological Well-Being, Social Skills, and Creative Thinking

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Abstract: Drama education in higher learning is not only a performance training, but it has immense prospects of enhancing the psychological well-being, social skills, and creative thinking among the students. However, the current literature has given little attention to its other developmental benefits, despite its artistic and pedagogical roles. This gap is addressed in the paper through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) that explores how drama education affects the psychosocial and cognitive evolution. The systematic review implied the discussion of 16 peer-reviewed articles published in 2015-2025 according to PRISMA rules, with the assistance of different educational and cultural backgrounds. The three core areas of the dramatic-based learning in the review suggest the same similar pattern, namely: increased emotional regulation and self-awareness, increased levels of communication, empathy and social interaction, and creative thinking and problem-solving capabilities. Such information forms a picture of drama education as a powerful and multidimensional tool of all-round student development. According to the study, the issue of change in the sphere of higher education is required, and drama should be viewed as a valuable element of academic research. It also highlights the importance of interdisciplinary strategies that relate drama with mental health, social learning and innovation. Lastly, the given research relocates drama education as a valuable means of individual and educational growth in universities.

Keywords: Higher Education, Drama Education, Psychological Well-being, Social Skills, Creative Thinking.

1. Introduction

It is a common fact that drama education has been among the best pedagogical approaches that can be applied to develop the skill of expressing oneself, critically reflecting, and working in a group. It is not merely critical to the case of higher education because it transcends the frames of artistic training as an instrument of providing psychological strength, enhancing social skills, and a mechanism of inspiring creative thinking that is increasingly important in complex and dynamic societies (Li & Qi, 2025). As the world institutions seek to inculcate holistic development in curriculum schemes, drama is one integrative method; to some degree, it has the capacity to incorporate the affective, cognitive, and social learning domains.

Historically, mastery of performance and disciplinary specialisation has dominated the education of drama in a tertiary context and has generally been found in the

theatre or arts faculties (Schupp, 2023). This low framing has been guilty of failing to realise its higher pedagogic and developmental affordances. Despite the anecdotal and practice-based reports that suggest the potential of psychosocial and cognitive benefits, no systematic study of these factors has been done. This fragmentation has been an obstacle to the advocacy of drama education as interdisciplinary educational discourses and policy-makers.

Empirical research studies on the effects of drama on psychological well-being, social interaction and creative thinking are shown to have a discernible gap in the current literature: the studies are scattered, inconsistently methodological, and limited in scope (Orkibi et al., 2025; Schwenke et al., 2021). In addition, integrative reviews that have summarized all these impacts in situations of higher education are few hence restricting the area to guide curriculum innovation and institutional policy.

In its turn, the current study methodically reviews the literature present to evaluate how drama education can help students to develop psychologically, socially, and creatively in higher education. Based on a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), the study gathers the evidence of various geographical and disciplinary settings to fill the gaps in the knowledge base.

In that direction, this paper will critically redefine and conceptualize the use of drama education as a multidimensional tool of provoking student learning and will give evidence-based information on pedagogical innovation in the context of contemporary higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Reframing Drama Education to Psychological Well-Being

The field of drama education in higher education has been linked to the aesthetics and performative training. Nevertheless, modern literature is coming to the realization of its potential with regard to promoting psychological well-being among students. The experiential and physical aspect of drama fosters self-consciousness, emotional control, and a psychological well-being atmosphere (Lomas, 2016). According to Athimoolam (2022), drama pedagogy is a therapeutic form in which the learners are involved in self-expression, personal transformation, and self-reflection. This is in line with the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) of Deci and Ryan (2012), which emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the dimensions that are inherently involved in the practices of drama to promote well-being.

The ability of drama to alleviate academic stress and emotional burnout has been emphasized in recent empirical studies. According to Elliott and Dingwall (2017), the practice of drama, particularly in terms of ethical and reflective approaches, can enable students to overcome identity crises and learn coping mechanisms. Specifically, community and trust as essential aspects of psychological safety are provoked in the emotionally safe spaces that are provided by ensemble work and role-play. Similar arguments are made by Davis (2024), who states that these shared experiences cultivate affective involvement and critical hope as a protection against the affective hardship of neoliberal academic experiences.

However, students should be wary of over-therapizing discourses that simplify the trauma, class, and identity issues. Ecclestone and Rawdin (2020) criticize what

they call the vulnerability zeitgeist in the educational discourse by stating that the excessive focus on well-being might unwittingly promote the deficit models. The reconsideration of drama education that is needed should thus not only focus on the affective but also on power, privilege, and agency.

2.2. Learning Drama and the Development of Social Skills

The key aspect of the learning value of drama is that it could help to build the social skills of students, such as empathy, communication, and teamwork. The interdependence in drama as a result of the immersive responsiveness between the actor and the audience makes drama a fertile field of interpersonal development. Amran and Siow (2025) highlight the benefits of drama-based pedagogies, including improvisation and the creation of ensembles, which provide well-structured environments of learning to practice social interaction in a high-stakes, but low-risk, setting. These processes reflect the communicative needs of the real world and promote social fluency needed in professional and civic life.

It has been shown by Busby, Freebody and Rajendran (2022) that drama in higher education promotes empathy and ethical sensitivity through perspective-taking activities with students. By going to the edge of their comfort zones and playing out entirely contrasting roles, students are therefore challenged and negotiated into social complexities and, as such, develop awareness of relationality. Yazdanfar, Moradimokhles and Zangeneh (2025) further note that the learning of drama education assists in the development of listening, negotiating, and consensus-building-skills, which are ever-growing and demanded in multidisciplinary and intercultural settings.

Nevertheless, though the literature is abundant with statements of the social value of drama, very little has been done to challenge critical assumptions contained in the social skills training. As it possible that such practices are a recreation of the norms of bourgeois civility, and thus, is it possible to disallow neurodivergent or culturally marginalized modes of sociability. In such a way, to rethink drama education both it is both important to acknowledge its social value and also to unpack its disciplinary ideologies.

2.3. Promoting Imaginative Thinking through Drama

One of the key forces to develop creativity is drama education, which has been widely advertised as a key competence in the twenty-first century. In contrast with the traditional teaching methods, drama arouses divergent thinking, ambiguity tolerance, and metaphorical thinking. The idea behind the drama pedagogy conceptualization is that it provides cognitive flexibility, enabling students to redefine problems and envision several possibilities (Hu et al., 2024). This conforms to the model of creative thoughts that was formulated by Guilford (1967) that emphasizes fluency, novelty, and elaboration, which are elicited by dramatic involvement.

Lee et al. (2016) extends this by informing us that emotional resonance of dramatic narrating enhances epistemic knowing, thus, resulting into integrative thinking in any area. These results support the ability of drama as a transdisciplinary practice to advance the concept of innovation and systemic thinking. In addition to this, the reflexive nature of drama, i.e., the repetition of stories, characters, and scenes, is a form of creative inquiry that is cyclic in nature.

Nevertheless, this kind of pedagogical richness is typically limited by institutional factors. Creativity, according to Olivant (2015), is exactly what should be repressed by standardized assessment regimes and constrained learning outcomes, as far as drama is concerned. Re-thinking drama education, then, is a challenge of not merely doubting the method of teaching, but also the institutional logics, which articulate the need to make the curious be controlled.

2.4. Addressing a Critical Framework of Drama in Higher Education

The rethink of drama teaching in detail must bring the psychological, social, and creative affordances of drama teaching to a critically informed context. This is entailing going beyond instrumentalist justifications which tie drama to effects of either employment or treatment. Rather, drama should be seen as a transitional practice modifying learners and learning environments (Okoye, 2022). It coincides with the critical pedagogies which emphasize on dialogic inquiry, cultural relevance, as well as ontological development.

Nevertheless, Williams (2024) observed that emotional literacies should not be overapplied in educational discourse. Although they accept the significance of emotional and social competencies, they say that these models confine the identity of the students to susceptible topics that need to be patented. The critical approach to drama should be alert about the politics of well-being, in particular, and should be aware that students are not patients but agents (Scott et al., 2017).

2.5. Theoretical Foundations of Drama Education in Higher Education

In order to critically learn the importance of drama education in improving the psychological well-being, social competencies, and creative thought processing, the synthesis of a theoretical framework is vital. The Sociocultural Theory developed by Vygotsky best fits this research since it focuses on interaction, collaboration, and development of higher mental functions through the use of cultural tools such as drama (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). It gives the basis of social and cognitive development of drama. This is complemented by Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, which emphasizes the way drama stimulates interpersonal, intrapersonal, and spatial intelligences (Gardner, 2011). The combination of these theories can provide a comprehensive perspective. The drama is helpful in the cognitive, emotional, and social development at the same time; therefore, Self-Determination Theory of Deci and Ryan (2012), which emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the dimensions that are inherently involved in the practices of drama to promote well-being, is the main reference point, and the others are applied to it by the emotional and developmental perspectives.

To sum up, the possibility of drama education to improve psychological well-being, social abilities, and creative thinking is becoming evidenced by both the empirical and theoretical literature. However, it needs an epistemological and structural change in the way in which higher education values, designs, and assesses learning in order that it can be fully achieved. Re-envisioning drama education in a critical manner can not only be used as a means of education but also as a means of nurturing a citizenry that is democratic, resilient, and full of imagination.

2.6. Gap in Literature

Although the benefits of drama education in tertiary education have increasingly become widely recognized, the missing link in the literature on the integrated effects of drama education is still evident in the psychological well-being, social abilities, and creative thinking. The literature tends to discuss these spheres separately without an interdisciplinary structure. In addition, the empirical studies on the mediating role of different cultural settings in these outcomes are scarce. The research of the future should be conducted in a holistic, longitudinal way to evaluate the transformative opportunity of drama education and challenge the problem of access, equity, and pedagogical ethics in the framework of higher education institutions.

3. Research Method

The methodology of the study is qualitative, interpretative, and aims at exploring the potential of drama teaching in promoting psychological well-being, social faculty, and creative thinking in higher education. It is based on secondary data of peer-reviewed materials, curriculum research, and institutional reports in the areas of education, psychology, and performance research. This approach will assist in cognizing the affective, cognitive, and social elements in the pedagogy of drama in a delicate manner and will reveal the data that cannot be acquired in quantitative research, particularly in a complex education and cultural setting.

3.1. Research Design

In this study, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is used to consolidate interdisciplinary studies conducted in the period between 2015 and 2025. The sources were found with the help of Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar and filtered according to the relevance of information on the effects of drama education on psychological well-being and social skills, as well as creativity in higher education. The SLR method guarantees transparency, rigor, and reproducibility. With a critical examination of theoretical frameworks and empirical research, the design facilitates thematic synthesis in education, psychology, and arts-based research to articulate the background pedagogical processes.

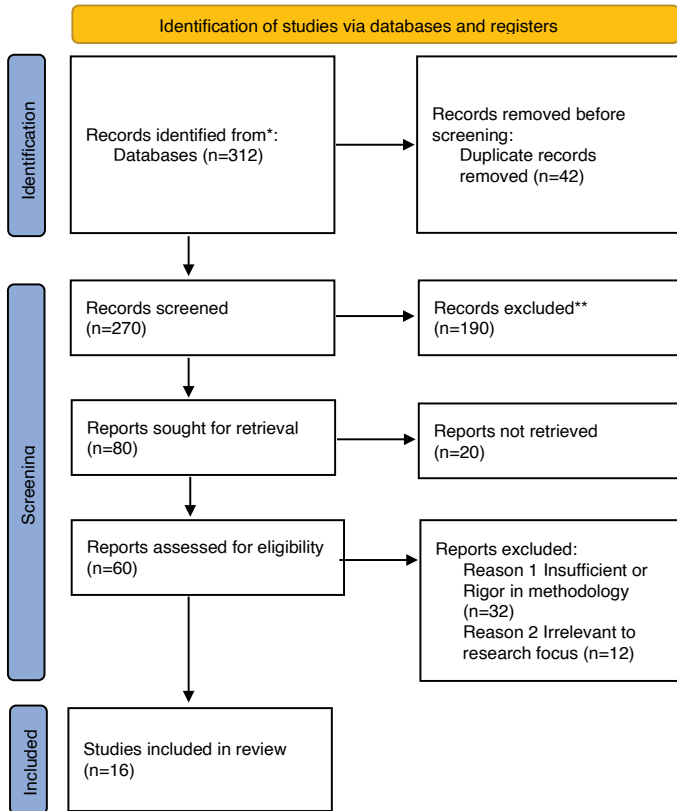
3.2. PRISMA Framework

According to the systematic review of best practice recommendations, the research relied on PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items to Systematic Reviews and meta-analysis) checklist. The model renders the process of the review to be transparent, systematic and repeatable. The PRISMA was adopted in the research to select, analyze and systematically identify the relevant literature. The PRISMA guidelines present clear method of data extraction and data analysis which ensure similarity and interpretation of results in the final reporting of the findings.

A total of 312 studies were found. Once we eliminated duplicates (N=42), we looked at the titles and abstracts of the 270 remaining papers. As a result, 190 articles were left out because they did not fit the criteria, leaving 80 full-text articles for the next review step. 44 papers were removed from the list since they missed the focus on motivation or did not match the criteria. Out of 36 papers, 20 were excluded

because they were not retrieved. In the end, 16 reliable studies were chosen for the final assessment (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The PRISMA Framework for the Selection of Studies for Analysis.



3.3. Inclusion Criteria

The review took into consideration the peer-reviewed journal materials and policy research, published not earlier than 2015 and 2025, respectively, dedicated to the effects of drama education on the psychological well-being, social skills, and creativity of higher education students. Relevant pedagogical frameworks, cognitive-emotional outcomes, and arts-based methodologies were covered by relevant, eligible sources. Empirical studies, reviews of literature with interdisciplinary and theoretically based research in the fields of education, psychology, and the performing arts were favored.

3.4. Exclusion Criteria

Articles that were not related to higher education, drama pedagogy, and psychological and social outcomes were eliminated. Such sources as non-peer-reviewed literature, literature before 2015, dissertations, grey literature, and non-English literature were excluded, as well.

3.5. *Thematic Analysis*

Table 1 overviews 16 peer-reviewed articles that investigated the role of drama and theatre education in improving students' creativity, communication, critical thinking, well-being, and self-efficacy. It describes the citation, aim, main findings and thematic codes of each of these studies and provides a summary on their comparative perspective. This synthesis identifies the general educational and psychological value of drama pedagogy in a wide variety of learning situations.

3.6. *Ethical Considerations*

The research will be based only on the sources of secondary data obtained in the form of peer-reviewed scholarly articles available in the open. All the literature is cited appropriately following the ethical standards of research. No direct ethical issues are presented since there will be no primary data and human subjects to be considered. Findings were interpreted and presented in an academically sound way with respect to cultural sensitivity without reductive or stereotypic modes of presentation, especially in terms of the psychological, social, and creative growth of learners in the context of drama education in higher education.

4. **Findings and Analysis**

The analysis demonstrates that the education of drama in higher education contributes greatly to the improvement of psychological well-being, social competency, and creative thinking. The most important results show that embodied learning, emotional expression, and collaborative engagement are important processes. These are influenced by pedagogical context, expertise of the facilitator, and institutional support. The paper points out that the study of drama is a type of performance but a type of transformation founded on social interaction, reflexive learning, and identity formation that needs to be further integrated in whole learning strategies.

4.1. *Selected Studies for Analysis*

The review is based on a strictly filtered range of literature that is consistent with PRISMA requirements to perform a systematic analysis. Included articles are scientifically sound scientific works that directly discuss the benefits of drama education in promoting psychological health, socialization and creativity among higher learning institutions. The emphasis was provided to empirical and theoretical studies that combine cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of performance-based learning. These sources serve as the basis of discovery of the research gaps and developing an integrative model of drama-based pedagogy as a holistic educational practice.

The higher education drama education organizational framework is a multidimensional set of factors that is influenced by emotional development, collaborative learning, and creative expression. Its potential revolves around the main themes of psychological well-being achieved with the help of reflective practice, social skills improved through interaction and empathy, and enhanced creative thinking achieved with the help of improvisation and experimentation. Behind this argument is the fact that drama-based pedagogies are transformative, and thus, the experiential learning becomes the driving force of student development. The analytical themes are listed in Table 2.

Table 1: Selected Studies for Data Analysis.

Citation	Aim or Title	Findings	Codes
Redling (2024)	Enhancing critical thinking and ethical responsibility through drama/theatre in UK higher education	Drama-based case studies strengthened reflective judgement, ethical awareness, and analytical skills	Critical thinking; Ethics; Higher education
Arda Tuncdemir (2025)	To examine how creative drama and playful learning can be integrated into teacher education and their impact on learning processes.	Creative drama enhanced trainee teachers' engagement, emotional involvement, reflective thinking, and pedagogical creativity.	Creative drama pedagogy; Playful learning; Teacher identity development; Emotional engagement; Reflective practice; Collaborative learning
Martyn (2022)	Drama/Theatre education as a pathway to wellbeing	Drama practices enhanced emotional expression, resilience, and personal growth	Wellbeing; Expression; Growth
Celume, Besançon and Zenasni (2019)	Drama pedagogy for fostering creativity	Drama pedagogy improved creative thinking in children and adolescents	Creativity; Pedagogy; Youth
Hong and Hong (2022)	Creative drama for values education	Creative drama enhanced imagination, value shaping, and integrative thinking	Values education; Imagination; Integration
Raza (2023)	Art fostering creativity and critical thinking	Arts-based learning enriched critical reasoning and innovative thinking	Critical thinking; Creativity; Arts education
Stutesman, Havens and Goldstein (2022)	Theatre classes and 21st-century skills	Theatre improved creativity, collaboration, communication, and socio-emotional skills	21st-century skills; Creativity; Communication
Athiemoalam and Braund (2025)	Decolonising teaching through drama pedagogy	Drama challenged Eurocentric norms and enabled culturally responsive learning	Decolonisation; Culture; Pedagogy
Hu and Shu (2025)	Drama education and critical thinking via collaboration	Drama tasks improved critical analysis, teamwork, and communication	Critical thinking; Collaboration; Communication
Cam Turkan (2025)	Creative drama and communication skills	Students improved clarity, confidence, and interpersonal communication	Communication; Confidence; Higher education
Prueksapitak, Inchan and Pakdeeronachit (2025)	Creative drama for medical students' communication	Applied theatre improved empathy and interactional competence	Medical education; Communication; Empathy
Schwenke et al. (2021)	Improv theatre and creativity/wellbeing	Improv increased creativity, flexibility, and wellbeing	Improv; Wellbeing; Creativity
Berkemeyer et al. (2025)	Improvisation and creative/work-related self-efficacy	Improvisation boosted self-esteem, creative confidence, and self-efficacy	Self-efficacy; Self-esteem; Improvisation
Hainselin, Aubry and Bourdin (2018)	Improvisation theatre and divergent thinking	Improvisation enhanced divergent thinking and cognitive flexibility	Divergent thinking; Improvisation; Adolescents
Jiang, Alizadeh and Cui (2023)	Drama-based interventions for mental health	Meta-analysis found reductions in stress, anxiety, and depression	Mental health; Intervention
Oliver et al. (2025)	Drama involvement and youth wellbeing	Drama participation improved wellbeing through increased self-efficacy	Wellbeing; Youth; Self-efficacy

Table 2: Key Themes.

Themes	Description	Studies
Theme 1. Transformative Cognitive–Emotional Growth Through Drama-Based Pedagogy	The process of drama-based learning promotes comprehensive cognitive and emotional growth through improving creativity, critical thinking, ethical cognition, team building, and well-being.	Redling (2024) Arda Tuncdemir (2025) Martyn (2022) Celume et al. (2019)
Theme 2. Drama as a Catalyst for Values, Cultural Awareness, and 21st-Century Competencies	These studies indicate that drama inculcates the most important values, cultural awareness, and contemporary skills.	Hong and Hong (2022) Raza (2023) Stutesman et al. (2022) Athiemoalam and Braund (2025)
Theme 3. Drama as a Vehicle for Enhancing Communication, Collaboration, and Psychological Well-Being	These research works demonstrate that drama-based learning is an effective tool for enhancing student communication, cooperative interaction, and psychological health.	Hu and Shu (2025) Cam Turkan (2025) Prueksapitak et al. (2025) Schwenke et al. (2021)
Theme 4. Drama Participation as a Pathway to Psychological Well-Being and Creative Self-Belief	Such studies pinpoint that the practices of improvisational and drama-based improvisation and drama boost considerably the level of psychological well-being through the enhancement of creative confidence, self-efficacy, and emotional resilience.	Berkemeyer et al. (2025) Hainselin et al. (2018) Jiang et al. (2023) Oliver et al. (2025)

Theme 1: Transformative Cognitive–Emotional Growth through Drama-Based Pedagogy

The adoption of drama-based pedagogy in higher learning is an ideal, fertile area for developing a transformative cognitive-emotional development. Empirical evidence in several studies over the last few years has indicated the same trend: drama promotes psychological well-being, creativity, and social-emotional intelligence. The case-study evidence presented by Redling (2024) indicates that drama develops critical thinking and ethical responsibility, especially when the state is in a state of so-called polycrisis. This cognitive activity is not solitary; it is actually overlapping with the affective engagement, which implies that students experience epistemological and also emotional growth. Qualitative evidence presented by Arda Tuncdemir (2025) supports this argument since it showed that drama-based strategies nurture collaborative creativity and well-being dispositions in learners. Such results demonstrate pedagogical continuity that could be successfully transferred to a higher education situation in case the proper instructional scaffolding is given.

The embodied and aesthetic aspects of drama are also elaborated by Martyn (2022), and affective resonance and shared reflection are the processes of emotional development described by the author. All these are aligned with the theoretical framework created by Celume et al. (2019) that is centered on the interrelationship of imagination, emotional regulation, and divergent thinking as cyclical in drama-based training. All these studies are unanimous: the drama pedagogy helps to acquire metacognitive awareness and emotional self-regulation, which leads to integrative cognitive-emotional development. This twofold enhancement is what constitutes the premise of transformative potential of drama education to generate adaptive, creative, and socially sensitive learners.

Theme 2: Drama as a Catalyst for Values, Cultural Awareness, and 21st-Century Competencies

Drama pedagogy is a multidimensional learning tool capable of enriching the creation of ethical virtues, cultural competence, and 21st century critical competencies. As Hong and Hong (2022) demonstrate, creative drama, experience, and imagination, as an amalgamation of experience and imagination, is a transforming vehicle of values education: it provokes the learners to internalize the moral reasoning through the embodied participation. This kind of alignment of the imaginative engagement with the moral query can be found by Raza (2023), who situates the art-based learning to be crucial in stimulating creativity and critical consciousness in the humanities.

Collaboration, communication, and adaptability, which are future-oriented abilities, are also promoted by theatre-based instruction. They both offer the empirical evidence that October of Stutesman et al. (2022) stipulate that creative thinking, empathy, and social-emotional intelligence are developed significantly in the theater classes significantly and are the main component of the 21st-century learning structure. In the meantime, Athimoolam and Braund (2025) insist on drama as a decolonizing pedagogy in higher education, helping to establish an intercultural dialogue and breaking down Eurocentric discourse with the help of performance-based enquiry. Collectively, these studies come to the same conclusion: drama-based learning goes beyond content acquisition in order to develop ethically-based, culturally literate, and cognitively adaptable individuals who are ready to be global citizens and professionals in the 21st century.

Theme 3: Drama as a Vehicle for Enhancing Communication, Collaboration, and Psychological Well-Being

The drama-based education is an active stimulus to the improvement of interpersonal and psychological resilience in the sphere of higher education. Hu and Shu (2025) confirm that drama pedagogies are a great support to critical thinking as they require long-term collaborative thinking and dialogic reasoning, which implies a strong connection between cognition and communication. The latter is intensified in the results of Cam Turkan (2025), where the interventions of the drama type significantly enhance the verbal articulation, non-verbal expressiveness, and confidence of students, which are the essential elements of successful academic and professional communication.

Applied drama is also very interdisciplinary. Prueksapitak et al. (2025) show that medical students in creative drama sessions also show significant improvement in patient-centered communication and empathetic interaction, which indicates the applicability of creative drama in clinical training. Moreover, Schwenke et al. (2021) also underline the opportunity of improving the level of creativity, psychological flexibility, and emotional well-being, associating dramatic spontaneity with less performance anxiety and stronger self-efficacy. Taken together, these studies support the assumption that drama helps develop collaborative intelligence and emotional flexibility, which is essential in 21st century learning, and, in the same time, helps to enhance psychological well-being due to embodied expression and social bonding. Drama therefore, can provide a holistic approach to human development in higher learning.

Theme 4: Drama Participation as a Pathway to Psychological Well-Being and Creative Self-Belief

Drama participation leads to synergistic growth of psychological well-being and creative self-belief by means of embodied expressive and socially situated practice. To support this argument, Berkemeyer et al. (2025) offer solid quantitative data demonstrating that improvisational theatre remarkably improves creative self-efficacy, self-esteem, and perceived work-related competence, which explains the transformational character of unscripted performance as an identity-making practice. Hainselin et al. (2018) also support this fact and state that the students of the improvisation theatre in the teen-stage are characterized by high levels of divergent thinking, which is directly related to creative cognition and confidence.

At a more macro psychosocial level, Jiang et al. (2023) relate a meta-analysis, which is systematic, and hint at the idea that the interventions that involve the use of drama produce a significant drop of psychological distress and enhancement of mental health, particularly during a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This indicates the curative and preventative ability of drama in diverse individuals. This points out the therapeutic and preventative power of drama in a variety of people. Complementarily, Oliver et al. (2025) disclose that the beneficial effects of drama on the well-being of young people occur through the lens of enhanced self-efficacy, which implies that the performance settings are implicit structures of agency, mastery, and resilience.

All of these studies affirm the claim of drama participation as an influential developmental instrument that combines emotional well-being and creative confidence in favor of overall personal development.

5. Discussion

This paper recasts drama education as a transformational pedagogical agent that goes well beyond performance training and facilitating psychological health, social competency and creativity. The results of the systematic review of 16 peer-reviewed sources are consistent with the basic dimensions of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2012) as they point to the intrinsic value of drama as an instrument to satisfy the basic psychological needs in educational institutions.

The concept of Drama based learning helps learners to be independent in the sense of improvisation and expressive freedom, where learners are able to make meaningful choices and experiment with identities. Martyn's (2022) study are examples of how reflective and creative collaborative tasks can be used to improve students in their emotional regulation and self-awareness, which are main elements of autonomy and competence. In a similar way, ensemble work, as explained in Redling (2024), fosters a perception of relatedness through the establishment of emotionally safe, interdependent learning environments. This proves the SDT claim that the psychological well-being of students improves during the time they feel emotionally engaged and competent.

Relatedness, which is one of the main tenets of SDT, is inherent to drama, since students play together in groups, act, and improvise. Such exercises arouse interpersonal affiliation and compassion, as confirmed in the research by Hu and Shu (2025) and Cam Turkan (2025). This social aspect is also clarified by the Sociocultural Theory by Vygotsky, which focuses on the social interaction and culturally mediated tools as the emphasized forms of learning. Drama is one of these tools as it allows students to internalize social norms, enhance complicated relations and acquire communication skills.

However, the social conventions that are ingrained in drama education have to be put into question. According to the arguments of Ecclestone and Rawdin (2020), the encouragement of deficit-based methods is possible by framing students as emotionally vulnerable. A comprehensive SDT-based pedagogy must instead enable learners to be active meaning-makers whereby cultural and neurodivergent differences in expression and interaction are recognized.

In drama, improvisation, metaphor and narrative develop the sense of competence in the learner, which allows him to explore new ideas and take risks in a favourable setting. Berkemeyer et al. (2025) and Hainselin et al. (2018) indicate that creative confidence and cognitive flexibility increase with involvement in improvisational theatre. These results resonate with the Theory of Multiple Intelligences by Gardner, specifically, the stimulation of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and spatial intelligences, the areas of learning that are not fully employed in conventional curricula. The ability of drama to motivate these intelligences gives SDT credibility when it states that promoting competence in many forms leads to motivation and psychological development. The literature (Jiang et al., 2023; Oliver et al., 2025) confirms the therapeutic value of drama, especially when it is based on a situation of collective stress, as it improves self-efficacy and decreases anxiety, which are based on the SDT concept of psychological need satisfaction. What Williams (2024) warns about is to instrumentalize of emotional literacy, however. Embodied practices should be central to drama pedagogy and not be reduced to tools of therapy or outcomes.

However, the institutional constraints are a big hindrance. As Olivant (2015) points out, inflexible assessment systems tend to suppress creativity and autonomy, which is

the essence of drama. To make SDT practically applied in SDT, change at the system level is necessary: universities should facilitate flexible programs, formative assessment, and training of facilitators that go in line with autonomy-supportive learning practices.

To conclude, the drama education that follows the principles of Self-Determination Theory is a potent way to whole-person development. It facilitates psychological health by meeting autonomy and relatedness, generates social fluency by means of collaborative practices which are based on Sociocultural Theory, and promotes creative competence by mobilizing multiple intelligence. This assimilation helps to hold on to the opinion that drama is not an auxiliary learning experience but a transformative, interdisciplinary pedagogy that can result in the creation of strong, creative, and socially conscious students. In order to fully utilize the potential to its full extent, higher education is forced to accept drama as one of the key approaches to developing well-being, identity, and creativity in the 21st-century education setting.

6. Conclusion

The paper analyzed the dramatic education as an imperative and transformational pedagogical approach that goes way deeper than theatrical performance. The paper has carried out an intensive literature review and analytical synthesis of 16 peer-reviewed literature. According to the findings, drama facilitates whole person development in students through psychological well-being, better interactions with others, and creative thinking. The metacognition, emotional regulation, empathy, and divergent thinking, which are facilitated by drama pedagogy, are not limited to academic performance but extend to human well-being as well. Moreover, the evidence of the utility of drama along the interdisciplinary spectrum imparts to the students an additional enrichment in terms of professional training and civic formation. Drama is an embodied, reflective, and collaborative form of learning that involves both affective and critical skills of the 21st-century challenge. The research supports the use of institutional change whereby drama is regarded as a strategic, interdisciplinary approach to equipping resilient, creative, and socially sensitive students. The education of drama must be incorporated into the frameworks of higher education systems that embrace inclusivity, creativity, and transformational learning in order to realize the potential of the education of drama.

6.1. Study Limitation

Although this research offers a useful literature review, the use of secondary data constrains the possibility of observing context-based dynamics in a variety of institutions. The chosen articles are methodologically sound but are different in their range and population; they lack representation of non-Western views and marginalized students. Also, grey literature and non-English sources are not reviewed, and they might omit the possible regional knowledge. There is also a dearth of longitudinal empirical studies to limit inferences regarding the long-term effects of drama-based pedagogies.

6.2. Future Directions

The main focus of the upcoming research is the longitudinal and cross-cultural research that can focus on the long-term outcomes of the drama pedagogy on

the development of students in diverse educational settings. The mixed-method methods are required, which would combine the quantitative impact evaluation with qualitative knowledge of identity development, emotional development, and intercultural competence. Moreover, the study ought to examine the mediation effects of institutional variables (e.g., curriculum design, assessment system, and faculty training) on the success of drama-based learning. An inquiry into the ways in which drama helps in enhancing equity, inclusion, and neurodiversity in higher education will also be necessary towards the development of a critical, accessible, and socially responsive paradigm of arts-integrated pedagogy.

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