

Dramatherapy as a Multidisciplinary Approach to Advancing Human Values in Education and Mental Health: A Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT

Dramatherapy offers an innovative approach to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly **SDG 3 (Good Health), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 16 (Peace and Justice)**. This interdisciplinary practice, blending psychology, theatre, and pedagogy, uniquely instills values like empathy, resilience, and ethical responsibility in educational and mental health settings. Its explicit links to multiple SDGs position it as a strategic intervention for global challenges, bridging mental health and peacebuilding.

This paper explores dramatherapy's application in schools and mental health, showing how embodied practices like role-play and storytelling enhance emotional literacy and social connectedness. Drawing on experiences from Sri Lanka's post-conflict and marginalized communities, it highlights dramatherapy's role in empowering participants to engage with personal narratives and social ethics, significantly promoting social cohesion and non-violence (SDG 16). Integrating dramatherapy into curricula and psychosocial programs can bolster efforts toward holistic education, mental well-being, and social inclusion—essential for sustainable development and advancing the global agenda for just, peaceful, and inclusive societies.

Keywords: Dramatherapy, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Education, Mental Health, Human Values

INTRODUCTION

The global agenda for sustainable development underscores the profound interconnection between health, education, peace, and social justice [1]. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a universal call to action, with specific emphasis on SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) [1]. These goals collectively advocate for holistic approaches that nurture human values, promote psychosocial well-being, and foster ethical responsibility across societies [2,3,4]. In this critical context, dramatherapy, a discipline that bridges the fields of psychology, education, and theatre, emerges as a potent modality for integrating these diverse goals within existing educational and mental health frameworks.

The framing of dramatherapy as a powerful modality capable of integrating these distinct SDGs signals a crucial shift away from siloed interventions [2,3,4]. Global challenges are increasingly recognized as deeply intertwined; traditional, isolated approaches often fall short because they address symptoms without tackling underlying causes or considering ripple effects across sectors [5]. Dramatherapy's capacity to integrate health [7], education [2,], and peacebuilding [6] suggests it functions as a systems-level intervention. This means it can foster individual transformation, such as enhanced emotional literacy [8], which simultaneously contributes to broader societal objectives like peacebuilding [6]. This integrated approach can yield more sustainable and resilient impacts than programs focused on single objectives, positioning dramatherapy as a model for future inter-sectoral development strategies aimed at comprehensive human development [9]. This paper aims to examine how dramatherapy, as a multidisciplinary practice, contributes to the cultivation of human values, emotional literacy, and ethical engagement, thereby directly supporting the realization of these vital SDGs.

DEFINING DRAMATHERAPY: FOUNDATIONS AND METHODOLOGIES

What is Dramatherapy?

Dramatherapy is formally defined as a form of psychotherapy that utilizes drama and theatre processes to facilitate personal growth [9], psychological healing [2], and social development [10]. It is grounded in the fundamental belief that creativity, play, and symbolic expression possess a unique capacity to unlock profound insights into personal and social dynamics, thereby enabling individuals to confront and effectively work through psychological difficulties [11]. This therapeutic modality draws upon a diverse array of techniques, including role-play, improvisation, storytelling, and ritual, to empower individuals in exploring their emotions, identities, and social relationships in a safe and structured environment (11.).

Multidisciplinary Frameworks and Theoretical Foundations

As a truly multidisciplinary approach, dramatherapy integrates theoretical frameworks from several distinct fields. It incorporates psychological theories, encompassing psychodynamic, humanistic, and cognitive-behavioral models [8], alongside principles from educational pedagogy [10] and performance studies [6]. This rich confluence of disciplines allows for the creation of highly flexible and culturally sensitive interventions that can be readily adapted to diverse educational and mental health settings. The effectiveness of dramatherapy is further supported by specific theoretical foundations such as Psychodrama [12], which emphasizes role-play and reenactment for insights into personal and social dynamics; Narrative Therapy [13], which uses storytelling to help individuals re-author their life narratives; and Embodiment Theories [14], which highlight the critical role of the body in processing emotions and experiences.

The synthesis of these diverse theoretical foundations and a wide array of techniques is a significant strength of dramatherapy [13]. This extensive theoretical and methodological toolkit is not merely a collection of disparate tools; it represents a strategic advantage that allows dramatherapy to be remarkably adaptable and culturally sensitive [13,15]. For instance, in post-conflict settings where trauma manifests differently across individuals and communities, a rigid therapeutic approach would likely prove ineffective. The ability to draw from psychodynamic insights for deep-seated trauma, narrative therapy for identity reconstruction, and embodied practices for non-verbal processing, combined with flexible techniques, means dramatherapy can tailor interventions to specific cultural nuances and individual needs [15,16]. This inherent adaptability is a critical factor in its demonstrated efficacy in complex, diverse environments, positioning it as a robust model for global mental health and educational interventions where one-size-fits-all solutions are consistently found to be inadequate.

KEY METHODOLOGIES IN PRACTICE

The key methodologies employed in dramatherapy include:

- **Role Play and Role Reversal:** These techniques are central, enabling individuals to explore emotions, identities, and social relationships. In educational contexts, role-play helps students experience diverse perspectives, understand moral complexities, and develop critical thinking skills [10]. Therapeutically, it allows clients to externalize inner conflicts, negotiate new identities, and envision alternative life narratives.
- **Storytelling and Myth-making:** Storytelling is a core component, facilitating personal growth and psychological healing [8]. In education, structured storytelling, such as the Eight-Part Story Method [13], guides students in exploring personal and collective narratives, fostering reflection on values like empathy, respect, cooperation, and social justice.
- **Ritual and Symbolic Enactment:** These methods are employed to help individuals confront and process psychological difficulties. For example, in mental health services, the creation of symbolic rituals has assisted individuals in processing unresolved grief and reconstructing their sense of identity [17].

Dramatherapy's Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals

Dramatherapy's interdisciplinary nature and flexible methodologies enable it to make significant contributions across multiple Sustainable Development Goals, fostering holistic human and societal development.

Advancing Quality Education (SDG 4): Fostering Values and Emotional Literacy

Education is viewed beyond mere knowledge transmission, focusing on forming ethically conscious, emotionally intelligent individuals who contribute positively to society [18]. Aligned with SDG 4 (Quality Education), dramatherapy offers innovative pedagogical strategies to embed value education directly within the learning process [19].

Techniques like the 'Eight-Part Story Method' [13] engage students in structured storytelling, guiding them to explore personal and collective narratives. This fosters deep reflection on human values, including empathy, respect, cooperation, and social justice. Story-making and role-play enable students to experience diverse perspectives, understand moral dilemmas, and develop critical thinking [10,3]. Practically, dramatherapy interventions in schools address prevalent issues like bullying, discrimination, and emotional regulation challenges [10,7,8]. By creating safe, playful spaces, students express latent emotions, rehearse alternative social behaviors, and internalize ethical principles [19]. For instance, in Sri Lanka, ongoing research integrates dramatherapy to support conflict-affected students, building resilience and belonging.

Dramatherapy's unique capacity to foster emotional literacy and ethical engagement through embodied practices extends beyond traditional cognitive learning, suggesting a transformative impact on educational outcomes [12]. Unlike didactic approaches, dramatherapy leverages experiential and embodied engagement [12]. Students don't just learn about empathy; they actively practice it through role-play, internalizing the feeling via direct engagement [10]. This active, emotional, and physical involvement leads to profound, lasting internalization of values and emotional regulation skills, moving beyond superficial understanding [10]. This approach offers a more effective pathway to developing holistic individuals capable of applying values in real-world situations, creating a robust foundation for responsible citizenship and societal contribution [18], critical for SDG 4's success. It also significantly contributes to emotional literacy—a crucial component of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) initiatives vital for holistic education [18].

Promoting Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3): Therapeutic Processes and Resilience Building

The intrinsic relationship between mental health and sustainable development is explicitly underscored by SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being). Mental health interventions that incorporate value-based frameworks are essential for building both individual and community resilience [3]. Dramatherapy, with its embodied, creative methods, offers powerful therapeutic processes that facilitate profound psychological healing and personal transformation [10].

Dramatherapy proves particularly effective in addressing a range of mental health challenges, including trauma, anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal [8]. The strategic use of metaphor and symbolic enactment provides a crucial safe distance for clients to explore painful experiences without the potential for direct confrontation or re-traumatization [12]. For example, through role-play, clients can externalize inner conflicts, negotiate new identities, and envision alternative life narratives, fostering a sense of agency and possibility [3]. In post-conflict Sri Lanka, dramatherapy has been extensively applied with war-affected populations, including women, children, and youth in Tamil and Muslim communities [20]. These interventions create vital spaces for participants to articulate experiences of loss, violence, and displacement, significantly contributing to psychological recovery and successful social reintegration [20].

Dramatherapy's ability to address trauma through *symbolic enactment* and *metaphor* provides a critical non-confrontational pathway to healing [17]. This is particularly vital in contexts where direct verbal processing might be re-traumatizing, stigmatizing, or culturally inappropriate [17]. In many cultures, especially those impacted by conflict or where emotional expression is highly regulated, direct verbalization of profound trauma can be deeply challenging [15]. Symbolic enactment and metaphor offer a psychological buffer,

allowing individuals to process overwhelming experiences at a safe distance, externalizing the pain without being re-immersed in its intensity [8, 17]. This non-verbal, embodied approach can circumvent cognitive defenses and cultural barriers, making it uniquely effective for populations who might otherwise resist or be harmed by traditional talk therapy [16]. This demonstrates that dramatherapy offers a culturally sensitive and trauma-informed approach, which is crucial for widespread mental health interventions in diverse global settings [15,16], particularly those recovering from collective adversity [21]. Moreover, dramatherapy actively supports the development of resilience, defined as the capacity to adapt to adversity while maintaining psychological well-being [21]. By engaging in structured dramatic processes, clients learn effective coping mechanisms, enhance self-efficacy, and strengthen their social support networks [17].

Fostering Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG 16): Social Inclusion and Conflict Resolution

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) explicitly emphasizes the imperative for peaceful, inclusive societies and accessible justice for all. Dramatherapy aligns powerfully with this goal by fostering social inclusion [9], cultivating empathy [8], and promoting non-violent communication [22].

One of dramatherapy's most significant contributions is its profound capacity to address deep-seated social divisions and foster constructive dialogue [23]. In multi-ethnic, post-conflict contexts, such as Sri Lanka, dramatherapy can facilitate intergroup understanding by enabling participants from different backgrounds to share their personal stories, embody diverse roles, and reflect on shared human experiences [23]. Such practices are instrumental in promoting reconciliation, actively reducing prejudice, and building much-needed trust across social divides (6,20).

Dramatherapy offers a powerful path to reconciliation, moving beyond intellectual understanding to foster deep empathy and trust [3,20]. Unlike simple discussions that can reinforce biases, dramatherapy utilizes **experiential empathy** [3]. By physically embodying another's role or narrating shared experiences, participants gain an **affective and kinesthetic understanding**, building profound empathetic connections that intellectual discourse often misses. This "walking in another's shoes" reveals shared humanity and mutual vulnerability, which is crucial for genuine reconciliation in deeply divided societies [6,20]. Dramatherapy builds social cohesion from the ground up, directly addressing the emotional and relational dimensions of conflict often overlooked by formal justice systems. Additionally, it can be effectively integrated into restorative justice programs within both educational and community settings [7]. Through dramatic re-enactments of conflicts and their resolutions, participants develop empathy for others' perspectives and acquire constructive conflict resolution skills [20].

KeyTable: Dramatherapy's Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals

SDG (Number & Name)	Key Contribution Areas	Specific Mechanisms/Techniques	Expected Outcomes/Impacts
SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being	Mental Health & Resilience	Trauma processing, Emotional regulation, Symbolic enactment	Psychological recovery, Enhanced self-efficacy, Stronger social support, Reduced anxiety/depression
SDG 4: Quality Education	Value Education & Emotional Literacy	Structured storytelling (Eight-Part Story Method), Role-play, Story-making	Holistic education, Empathy development, Critical thinking, Ethical responsibility, Responsible citizenship
SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	Social Inclusion & Conflict Resolution	Intergroup dialogue, Embodied role-taking, Restorative justice, Collaborative performance	Reduced prejudice, Reconciliation, Trust-building, Non-violent communication, Social cohesion

Empirical Insights: Case Examples from Sri Lanka

The practical application and impact of dramatherapy in diverse contexts are illustrated through specific case examples and experiences from Sri Lanka. These serve as empirical evidence supporting the theoretical arguments for dramatherapy's efficacy in advancing sustainable development goals in challenging environments.

Education Sector

In Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka, the Theatre Action Group (TAG) has pioneered the successful integration of drama as a therapeutic intervention within school settings, directly addressing the profound emotional needs of children grappling with war-related trauma [24]. Founded by artists from the University of Jaffna, TAG meticulously crafted a therapeutic environment through engaging games and theatrical performances. This approach mirrored effective counselling methods, offering genuine warmth, respect, and empathetic support, which proved crucial for children navigating the aftermath of conflict [24].

Teachers, working closely with TAG personnel, played an indispensable role in these weekly sessions [24]. Within this safe and supportive space, children were actively encouraged to articulate their often-harrowing personal narratives concerning violence, poverty, and community conflicts. This provided a vital outlet for emotional expression and catharsis, allowing them to process deeply held feelings. These individual stories were then collectively transformed into dramatic scenes, empowering students to enact their own experiences and those of adults within their communities. Performing these dramas for their families and communities not only fostered a sense of agency but also facilitated shared understanding and healing [24].

This structured, creative process yielded significant improvements in the children's mental health, manifested through observable behavioral changes such as increased assertiveness and improved manageability [24]. A notable surge in self-confidence was also evident. Ultimately, these drama therapy interventions transcended individual healing, fostering a more inclusive classroom environment and promoting overall psychological well-being, emotional stability, and personal growth among adolescents [24]. This holistic impact often translated into a more positive attitude towards their education, demonstrating the profound and far-reaching benefits of this innovative therapeutic approach in a post-conflict context.

Mental Health Services

In community mental health programs across post-conflict Sri Lanka, specialized dramatherapy sessions have proven crucial for women profoundly affected by the civil conflict, particularly those grappling with the unresolved grief from disappeared family members. These initiatives align with broader psychosocial support efforts essential for communities recovering from protracted ethno-political violence.

A notable example is the "Manohari Programme," a community-based intervention of WHO Colombo Office, designed to bolster psychosocial well-being [25]. Within this framework, dramatherapy emerged as an innovative and highly effective modality. Participants engaged in creating symbolic rituals and dramatic expression, finding vital avenues to confront and process their profound sorrow and trauma. The immersive act of "playing different roles" within these sessions was reported to significantly alter mindsets and foster positive behavioral changes, underscoring the transformative power of this therapeutic approach [25].

This therapeutic process, which can resemble group counseling by offering a safe space for emotional expression and catharsis, facilitated new insights among participants. It enabled women to begin the arduous, yet crucial, process of reconstructing a fractured sense of personal and social identity [25]. Leveraging dramatherapy's recognized capacity to address collective trauma and aid in conflict resolution, these sessions not only provided an outlet for emotional release but also facilitated collective healing [25]. The successful engagement of community mental health professionals in addressing lingering post-conflict mental health issues, especially for female-headed families, underscores the promise of such targeted psychosocial interventions in peacebuilding, fostering resilience and a renewed sense of self and community.

Community Reconciliation

Dramatherapy-based community workshops, particularly using Playback Theatre, have been crucial in fostering reconciliation among diverse youth in post-war Sri Lanka [20]. These initiatives successfully united Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim youth, offering a structured environment for sharing and enacting personal stories. Playback Theatre, an applied theatre form, addressed psychosocial needs by using real-life audience stories, providing a structured listening practice that fostered compassion and empathy, vital for countering divisive forces [20, 21]. This process of eliciting and witnessing stories served as a live oral history, enabling youth to explore experiences, find understanding, express themselves, and achieve catharsis, while strengthening life roles [20].

These workshops empowered youth in peacebuilding. For example, the Active Theater Movement's dramatherapy enabled participants to voice previously unspoken "matters... connected with war," instilling courage [26]. Participants reported mental relaxation, mutual consolation, and significant "personality changes," highlighting theatre's transformative power in reconciliation [26]. This cross-cultural engagement supports covenantal pluralism—mutual respect beyond tolerance—and adaptive peacebuilding through local ownership in war-affected communities.

Beyond specific dramatherapy, broader theatre in Sri Lanka has been a critical tool for community healing and post-war reconciliation following the 1989-2009 civil war. Companies like Janakaraliya ("Theatre of the People") actively promoted social transformation [27]. By having Sinhala and Tamil actors live communally and learn each other's languages, they cultivated multi-perspectival dialogue, fostering coexistence. This bridged ethnic divides and challenged binaries, demonstrating theatre's role as a "change agent" in creating vital dialogue spaces in contexts of mistrust, ultimately impacting collective healing and societal reconstruction [27].

Dramatherapy in post-conflict Sri Lanka consistently demonstrates success across education, mental health, and community reconciliation, highlighting its adaptability and broad applicability. Its core principles effectively address diverse needs stemming from humanitarian crises. This scalable model, proven generalizable in a challenging environment, positions it as a promising model for integrated humanitarian and development efforts globally.

Challenges, Considerations, and Future Directions

While dramatherapy offers significant benefits for education, mental health, and peacebuilding, its wider implementation faces several challenges and requires careful considerations. Addressing these barriers is crucial for maximizing its potential impact.

Challenges and Considerations

While dramatherapy offers notable benefits for education, mental health, and peacebuilding, its broader implementation faces key challenges. Resource constraints, particularly the limited number of trained dramatherapists in regions like Sri Lanka, restrict service expansion. Cultural sensitivity is another concern; methods must align with specific cultural values to ensure relevance and acceptance. Institutional support through policy integration in education and health sectors is also essential for sustainability. These challenges are interconnected: a lack of trained local practitioners limits cultural adaptation and advocacy for policy support, while insufficient institutional backing perpetuates resource shortages. Addressing these barriers requires a coordinated strategy that invests in local training, builds research evidence, and engages policymakers. A comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach is necessary to effectively mainstream dramatherapy.

Proposed Future Directions

To truly harness dramatherapy's transformative power, strategic future pathways are imperative. Prioritize substantial investment in training, research, and advocacy to seamlessly integrate dramatherapy into national

educational and mental health frameworks. Its inclusion in school and university curricula can cultivate emotional literacy and value education. Expanding mental health services must embrace dramatherapy as a vital therapeutic modality. Embedding it within community development and peacebuilding initiatives will powerfully foster social cohesion and non-violent communication. These endeavors necessitate systemic integration, policy support, curriculum development, and professional recognition. The objective is to institutionalize dramatherapy as a foundational component within educational, health, and peacebuilding infrastructures, contributing profoundly to sustainable development rooted in human dignity, holistic well-being, and ethical principles, ensuring lasting impact.

CONCLUSION

Dramatherapy is a powerful multidisciplinary approach bridging education, mental health, and social cohesion. By fostering human values, emotional literacy, and ethical awareness, it aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals—especially SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 4 (Quality Education), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Its potential to promote individual well-being, inclusive education, and peacebuilding makes it vital for building sustainable, just societies. Dramatherapy emphasizes that true sustainability centers on human dignity, well-being, and ethical engagement—not just environmental or economic factors. By nurturing these capacities, it addresses the inner development essential for broader societal resilience. Future directions should focus on integrating dramatherapy into educational curricula, expanding its role in mental health services, and embedding it in community development and peacebuilding efforts. Through such strategic integration, dramatherapy can profoundly advance sustainable development, ensuring that human flourishing remains central to global progress.

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