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## How Drama Education Promotes University Students' Psychological Resilience and Self-Identity: A Conceptual Mechanism Framework

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**Abstract:** Mental health education in higher education often relies on didactic instruction and may inadequately address students' deeper needs for self-exploration and adaptive growth. This conceptual paper explains how drama education may foster university students' psychological resilience and self-identity development by specifying the psychological processes through which drama-based learning operates. Using a mechanism-oriented conceptual analysis grounded in educational psychology and drama pedagogy, the study synthesises existing literature and theory to derive an integrative explanatory framework comprising three core mechanisms: role experience, emotional resonance, and reflective expression. Role experience provides psychologically safe exposure to symbolic challenge and coping rehearsal; emotional resonance supports empathy, social recognition, and meaning making through shared affective engagement; and reflective expression consolidates experience into self-narratives and self-regulatory resources through structured articulation and dialogue. The proposed framework clarifies the developmental logic through which drama education can function as a psychologically generative pedagogy, rather than merely an engaging instructional activity. It also yields testable propositions and design-oriented implications to guide future empirical research and educational practice in higher education. This framework conceptualises drama education as a pedagogical approach for psychological development, not as a clinical or therapeutic intervention.

**Keywords:** Drama education; Psychological resilience; Self-identity; Experiential pedagogy; Student development; Higher education

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### 1. Introduction

The university stage represents a critical period of psychological development, during which students undergo significant transitions in self-awareness, social roles, and adaptive capacity in response to new academic and living environments [1]. During this stage, psychological challenges such as stress, identity confusion, and emotional instability are common, making mental health education an essential component of higher education systems [2-3]. However, traditional approaches to mental health education in universities are predominantly lecture-based and emphasise the one-way transmission of knowledge [4]. Although such approaches

may increase awareness, they often fail to engage students' inner experiences or support deeper processes of self-exploration, emotional integration, and personal growth. Among the core indicators of psychological maturity in university students, psychological resilience and self-identity play particularly important roles [5-6]. Psychological resilience refers to individuals' capacity to adapt positively and maintain psychological balance when confronted with stress, adversity, and change [7]. It is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process that can be strengthened through appropriate experiential engagement. Self-identity, in turn, concerns individuals' relatively stable understanding of their roles, values, and life orientation, shaping their sense of "who I am" and "who I may become"

[8]. These two constructs are closely interconnected: a coherent self-identity provides internal stability and meaning that support resilient coping, while psychological resilience facilitates identity exploration and consolidation in the face of challenges. Difficulties in either domain may increase vulnerability to anxiety, confusion, or maladaptive coping during the university years.

Drama education offers an experiential and participatory pedagogical approach that integrates emotional engagement, embodied action, and social interaction [9]. Through role-playing, situational immersion, and collaborative performance, students are placed in structured yet flexible contexts that encourage perspective-taking, emotional expression, and interpersonal exploration. From an educational psychology perspective, these features allow learners to integrate cognition and emotion through action, creating opportunities for self-reflection and psychological growth that are difficult to achieve through conventional instruction. As a result, drama education has increasingly been recognised as a promising pedagogical approach for supporting students' psychological development in higher education [10]. University students are at a stage characterised by heightened motivation for self-exploration, emotional expression, and meaningful social connection. Drama-based learning creates psychologically safe spaces in which students can encounter conflict, experience symbolic forms of pressure, and rehearse responses to challenging situations without real-world consequences [11]. The collaborative and interactive nature of drama further supports psychosocial development by strengthening empathy, interpersonal understanding, and social belonging. In addition, the reflective dimension embedded in drama pedagogy enables students to examine their emotional reactions, decisions, and behavioural patterns, contributing to clearer self-understanding and more stable identity formation.

Despite growing interest in the educational and psychological value of drama, existing studies have often focused on outcomes or descriptive benefits, while paying relatively limited attention to the underlying psychological processes through which drama education exerts its effects [11]. In particular, there remains a lack of integrative conceptual frameworks that specify how experiential, emotional, and reflective elements of drama education translate into the development of psychological resilience and self-identity among university students [12]. To address this gap, this paper presents a conceptual, mechanism-based framework that explains how drama education promotes psychological resilience and self-identity development in higher education. Specifically, we propose three interrelated mechanisms—role experience, emotional resonance, and reflective expression—that capture the core psychological processes activated in drama-based learning. By articulating these mechanisms and their connections to resilience and identity outcomes, this study aims to clarify why drama education can

function as a psychologically developmental pedagogy rather than merely an engaging instructional activity.

Guided by this framework, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Through what psychological mechanisms can drama education foster resilience among university students?

RQ2: How does drama-based learning support self-identity development in emerging adulthood?

RQ3: What practical design principles can guide drama-based interventions in higher education?

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, it develops a mechanism-oriented conceptual framework that specifies the psychological pathways linking drama education to psychological resilience and self-identity development among university students. Second, it integrates educational psychology and drama pedagogy to clarify how experiential, emotional, and reflective processes jointly support psychological development in higher education. Third, it formulates theoretically grounded propositions that can inform future empirical research and intervention design.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a theory-driven and mechanism-oriented conceptual methodology to examine how drama education may contribute to the development of psychological resilience and self-identity among university students. The study does not employ an empirical or experimental design. Instead, it focuses on analytical explanation and conceptual derivation. The purpose of the methodology is to clarify the psychological processes activated in drama-based learning and to explain how these processes may lead to developmental outcomes. The methodological approach is grounded in educational psychology, developmental psychology, and drama pedagogy. It aims to construct an internally coherent explanatory framework rather than to test causal relationships.

### 2.1 Theoretical Analysis Approach

The analysis begins with a theoretical clarification of the two focal constructs: psychological resilience and self-identity. These constructs are examined as developmental processes rather than static traits. Psychological resilience is approached as a dynamic capacity involving emotional regulation, adaptive coping, and recovery following stress or challenge. Self-identity is conceptualised as a relatively stable yet evolving system of self-understanding, values, and role commitments. Particular attention is given to their relevance during emerging adulthood, a period characterised by identity exploration and heightened exposure to stressors.

The theoretical analysis also considers the reciprocal relationship between resilience and self-identity. A

coherent sense of self provides internal stability that supports adaptive coping. At the same time, resilience enables individuals to engage with uncertainty and challenge in ways that facilitate identity consolidation. Clarifying this relationship establishes the developmental targets of the framework and defines the psychological needs against which drama education is examined. This step provides the conceptual grounding for subsequent mechanism-based interpretation.

## 2.2 Mechanism-Based Interpretive Framework

The central analytical strategy of the study is mechanism-based interpretation. Rather than focusing on outcomes alone, the analysis seeks to specify how drama education engages learners' psychological processes. Drama education is decomposed into core experiential elements that are consistently emphasised across drama pedagogy and applied theatre literature. From this decomposition, three interrelated mechanisms are identified.

The first mechanism is role experience. Role experience refers to learners' engagement with fictional or symbolic roles within structured dramatic contexts. Through role enactment, students encounter simulated conflicts, dilemmas, and emotional demands [14]. These experiences allow rehearsal of emotional and behavioural responses under conditions of psychological safety. Role experience is analysed as a process that enables exposure to symbolic adversity and the practice of adaptive coping strategies.

The second mechanism is emotional resonance. Emotional resonance emerges through interaction with others during collaborative enactment. It involves shared emotional engagement, empathy formation, and affective attunement among participants. Emotional resonance is treated as a social-psychological process through which students experience validation, belonging, and emotional meaning [14]. This mechanism is examined in relation to identity-related processes such as self-worth and social identification.

The third mechanism is reflective expression. Reflective expression refers to structured opportunities for articulation and meaning-making following dramatic experience. These opportunities may include discussion, guided reflection, and narrative expression. Reflective expression enables learners to externalise experience, organise emotional responses, and integrate insights into self-narratives [15]. This mechanism is analysed as central to the consolidation of both resilience-related resources and self-identity.

## 2.3 Interpretive Pedagogical Analysis

In addition to psychological mechanisms, the study adopts an interpretive pedagogical analysis to examine how drama education functions as a learning environment.

This analysis focuses on pedagogical conditions rather than instructional techniques. Key features include dramatic situation design, embodied participation, collaborative interaction, and aesthetic experience. Dramatic situations provide structured contexts that constrain and guide action while allowing multiple possible responses. Embodied participation emphasises learning through action rather than observation alone. Collaborative interaction creates interdependence among learners and introduces social feedback into the learning process. Aesthetic experience shapes emotional engagement and attention. These pedagogical features are examined in terms of how they support psychological safety, depth of engagement, and reflective capacity. By linking pedagogical features to psychological processes, the analysis clarifies how drama education functions as a developmental context rather than merely an expressive activity. This step helps explain how educational design conditions the activation of the proposed mechanisms.

## 2.4 Integrative Analytical Logic

The framework is constructed through an integrative analytical logic. This logic connects developmental constructs, psychological mechanisms, and pedagogical conditions into a coherent explanatory structure. Psychological resilience and self-identity define the developmental outcomes of interest. Role experience, emotional resonance, and reflective expression specify the internal processes through which change may occur. Pedagogical features define the conditions under which these processes are activated. This integration allows the framework to address two complementary questions. The first concerns what drama education may contribute to students' psychological development. The second concerns how these contributions are generated through specific experiential and reflective processes. The integrative logic ensures conceptual coherence across sections and supports the derivation of theoretically grounded propositions.

## 2.5 Literature Basis and Source Selection

The conceptual analysis is informed by a narrative synthesis of literature from multiple domains. These domains include drama education and applied theatre in higher education, drama-based educational interventions distinct from clinical dramatherapy, and psychological research on resilience and identity development during emerging adulthood. Literature was identified through searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, with supplementary searches conducted in Google Scholar.

The selection emphasised peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly monographs published within the past decade. Seminal theoretical works were also included to support conceptual definitions and analytical mapping. This approach ensures that the framework is grounded in established theory while remaining responsive to contemporary educational and psychological research.

## 2.6 Analytical Procedure

To enhance transparency and replicability at the conceptual level, the analysis followed an iterative four-step procedure. First, key concepts were defined and delimited. Drama education was explicitly treated as a pedagogical approach rather than a therapeutic intervention. Psychological resilience and self-identity were operationalised as developmental processes relevant to higher education contexts.

Second, core experiential and pedagogical components of drama education were extracted from the literature. These components included role-taking, simulated conflict, collaborative enactment, and reflective dialogue. Third, each component was analytically mapped onto psychological processes associated with resilience and identity development. This mapping drew on established theoretical accounts of emotional regulation, coping rehearsal, perspective-taking, and self-narrative construction.

Fourth, the mapped relationships were synthesised into the tripartite mechanism framework. This synthesis supported the formulation of design-oriented implications and theoretically grounded propositions. These propositions are intended to guide future empirical research and intervention development rather than to serve as tested claims.

Through this structured process of conceptual clarification, mechanism-based reasoning, pedagogical interpretation, and transparent analytical procedure, the methodology provides a rigorous foundation for explaining the psychological developmental value of drama education.

## 3. Theoretical Foundations of Drama Education

The university stage constitutes a critical period of psychological development. During this stage, students experience substantial changes in social roles, living environments, and learning demands. These transitions are frequently accompanied by psychological challenges, including stress, uncertainty, emotional fluctuation, and identity exploration. Mental health education has therefore become an essential component of higher education. However, traditional approaches in university mental health education are often dominated by didactic instruction and one-way knowledge transmission. While such approaches may increase awareness, they tend to have limited impact on students' inner experiences and deeper developmental processes, particularly those related to emotional integration, self-understanding, and adaptive growth [16].

Drama education offers an alternative pedagogical approach that emphasises experiential participation, emotional engagement, and social interaction. Through structured dramatic activities, students are placed in

situations that require action, decision-making, and emotional response. These experiences enable learners to encounter psychological content not only cognitively but also affectively and behaviorally. From a psychological perspective, such engagement creates conditions for perspective-taking and embodied understanding of others' emotional and social states. More importantly, participation in drama-based learning allows students to reflect on their own emotional reactions, regulate responses, and integrate experience into personal meaning, thereby supporting psychological development in ways that extend beyond traditional instructional formats.

### 3.1 Connotation and Characteristics of Drama Education

From the perspective of educational psychology, drama education can be understood as a composite learning process that integrates emotion, cognition, and embodied action. Learning in drama does not occur solely through verbal explanation or abstract reasoning. Instead, it unfolds through participation in situated activities that require learners to act, respond, and interact within constructed scenarios. Core features of drama education include situatedness, interactivity, and aesthetic engagement [17]. These features distinguish drama education from conventional classroom instruction and shape its psychological impact.

Situatedness refers to the embedding of learning within meaningful contexts. In drama education, students engage with predefined yet flexible scenarios that simulate social situations, conflicts, or dilemmas [18]. These scenarios provide a structured environment while allowing multiple interpretations and responses. Interactivity emphasises the reciprocal nature of learning. Students respond not only to the situation but also to the actions and emotions of others. Aesthetic engagement involves attention to form, expression, and emotional tone, which intensifies experiential involvement [19]. Together, these characteristics support learning through action and experience rather than passive reception.

The psychological characteristics of drama education in higher education can be further specified in terms of psychological safety, emotional engagement, and group interaction. Psychological safety is facilitated by the symbolic distance created through role adoption. Acting "as if" allows students to express thoughts and emotions without direct personal exposure [20]. This symbolic protection reduces fear of evaluation and encourages emotional risk-taking. Emotional engagement refers to the intensity and authenticity of affective experience during dramatic enactment. Students encounter a range of emotions, including tension, conflict, satisfaction, and resolution. Repeated engagement with such emotional variation supports the development of emotional awareness and regulation [21]. Group interaction emerges through collaborative creation and performance. Students experience being seen, understood, and responded to by

peers, which contributes to social learning and psychological support.

Drama education, therefore, contributes to psychological development not merely by providing opportunities for expression, but by enabling students to experience and process psychological content within structured action. The distinction between “playing a role” and “experiencing a role” is central. Through role enactment, students rehearse responses to challenges, explore emotional reactions, and reflect on behavioural choices. These processes parallel psychological activities involved in real-life coping and decision-making. By concentrating experience within dramatic situations, drama education renders psychological processes more accessible and subject to reflection, thereby supporting emotional refinement, cognitive integration, and identity exploration. Creative drama facilitates emotional refinement and cognitive integration by immersing students in diverse situations, allowing them to reflect on their experiences. This process supports identity exploration, as participants engage with various roles and scenarios, broadening their understanding of self and community [22].

### **3.2 Conceptual Relationship between Psychological Resilience and Self-Identity**

Psychological resilience refers to an individual’s capacity to maintain balance and adapt positively in the face of stress, adversity, and change. It involves multiple interrelated processes, including emotional regulation, flexible coping, and recovery following disruption. Resilience is not a fixed trait. It develops through experience and can be strengthened through exposure to manageable challenges and opportunities for adaptive response [23]. For university students, resilience is particularly salient due to academic pressure, interpersonal demands, and uncertainty about future roles.

Self-identity refers to an individual’s relatively stable understanding of personal values, roles, and life direction. It provides coherence across experiences and supports continuity of the self over time. Self-identity answers fundamental questions concerning who one is and how one relates to others and to society. Its formation is shaped by cognitive reflection, emotional experience, and social feedback. A coherent self-identity functions as an internal reference system that guides behaviour and decision-making in complex environments.

Psychological resilience and self-identity are closely interconnected. A coherent sense of self provides meaning and direction, which supports adaptive coping when individuals encounter stress or failure. Students with clearer self-identity are more likely to interpret challenges as manageable and to persist despite setbacks [24]. At the same time, resilience supports identity development by enabling individuals to engage with uncertainty and to learn from adverse experiences. Through successful

adaptation, individuals gain confidence and clarity about their capabilities and values, which contribute to identity consolidation [25]. When either resilience or self-identity is underdeveloped, students may experience confusion, anxiety, or avoidance in response to challenge.

The coordinated development of resilience and self-identity is therefore central to psychological well-being in higher education. Educational approaches that engage both constructs simultaneously are particularly valuable. Drama education, with its emphasis on experiential challenge, emotional engagement, and reflection, provides conditions under which resilience-related processes and identity-related processes can be activated in parallel. This dual relevance positions drama education as a promising context for supporting integrated psychological development.

### **3.3 Logical Compatibility between Drama Education and College Students’ Psychological Development**

Drama education aligns closely with the developmental characteristics and psychological needs of university students. During this stage, students are actively exploring personal values, social roles, and relational patterns. Drama-based learning provides a context in which such exploration can occur through action rather than abstract discussion. Role-playing allows students to experiment with alternative perspectives and behaviours. Simulated conflict introduces symbolic pressure that resembles real-life challenges without imposing real-world consequences. These features enable students to practice emotional regulation, problem-solving, and social adaptation within a contained environment [26].

The collaborative nature of drama education further supports psychosocial development. University students are learning to navigate complex social environments that require cooperation, negotiation, and mutual understanding. Drama activities require shared decision-making and coordinated action. Through collaboration, students experience empathy, recognition, and group belonging. Such experiences contribute to social identity and provide psychological resources that support resilience [27]. Interaction within a group also offers immediate feedback, which supports self-awareness and interpersonal learning.

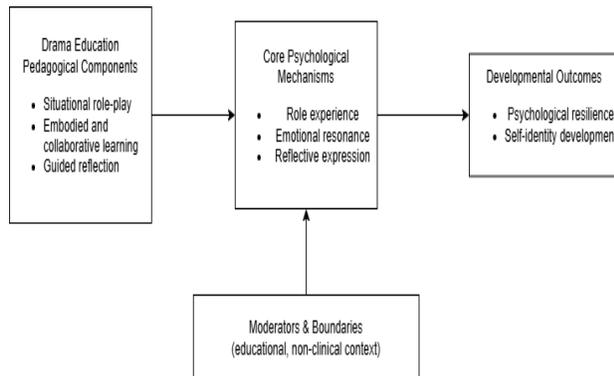
Drama education also places strong emphasis on reflection. Reflection is a key mechanism through which experience is transformed into learning. Following enactment, students are encouraged to examine their actions, emotional responses, and decision-making processes. This reflective practice supports metacognitive awareness and facilitates understanding of personal patterns of behaviour and emotion. Through repeated reflection, students can integrate experience into a more coherent sense of self, which strengthens self-identity.

In addition, the aesthetic dimension of drama education

contributes to psychological integration. Engagement with artistic form can alter emotional states and broaden perspective. Aesthetic experience allows students to distance themselves from immediate stressors and to reinterpret challenges within a wider frame of meaning. This process supports both emotional regulation and identity-related meaning-making. Drama education thus functions not only as an artistic practice, but as a pedagogical approach that is structurally compatible with the psychological developmental tasks of university students.

### 3.4 Conceptual Framework of Drama Education and Psychological Development

Figure 1 presents a high-level conceptual framework that synthesises the core theoretical assumptions of this study regarding how drama education contributes to university students' psychological resilience and self-identity development. The framework is intentionally designed to offer an overarching explanatory structure rather than a detailed process model. It highlights the central pathways through which drama education operates in higher education contexts. Importantly, the framework positions drama education as a pedagogical practice rather than a therapeutic intervention. This distinction clarifies the educational scope and ethical boundaries of the proposed model.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework of drama education and psychological development in higher education

At the input level, the framework identifies key pedagogical components of drama education, including situational role-play, embodied and collaborative learning, and guided reflection. These components capture the essential features repeatedly emphasised in drama-based pedagogy within educational psychology and arts education literature. Situational role-play provides structured yet symbolic contexts in which students can engage with challenges at a safe psychological distance. Embodied and collaborative learning foregrounds active participation and interpersonal engagement, moving beyond passive forms of instruction. Guided reflection supports the consolidation of experience by encouraging students to articulate and examine their thoughts, emotions, and actions.

These pedagogical components are theorised to activate three core psychological mechanisms: role experience, emotional resonance, and reflective expression. Role experience allows students to explore alternative perspectives and behavioural responses through enactment. Emotional resonance facilitates affective engagement and shared emotional experiences within a group setting. Reflective expression enables students to translate embodied and emotional experiences into conscious understanding. Together, these mechanisms represent the primary means through which drama education influences psychological development.

Through the operation of these mechanisms, drama education is proposed to contribute to two interrelated developmental outcomes: psychological resilience and self-identity development. Psychological resilience is understood as students' capacity to adapt to challenges, manage stress, and recover from difficulties. Self-identity development refers to the formation of a coherent and reflective sense of self across experiences and social contexts. The framework does not assume a direct or deterministic relationship between educational participation and outcomes. Instead, it emphasises developmental processes that unfold over time through repeated engagement.

Finally, the framework explicitly acknowledges the presence of moderators and boundary conditions. These include the educational and non-clinical nature of drama education, the role of ethical facilitation, and contextual influences within higher education settings. By incorporating these boundaries, the framework avoids overgeneralisation and clarifies the conditions under which drama education may be most effective. Overall, Figure 1 provides a coherent conceptual map that guides the interpretation of the theoretical arguments advanced in this study and offers a foundation for future empirical investigation.

## 4. Mechanisms of Drama Education

Psychological resilience and self-identity are widely regarded as central indicators of psychological development among university students. Within higher education contexts, these constructs are closely related to students' capacity to cope with academic pressure, interpersonal challenges, and uncertainties regarding future roles. Conventional mental health education in universities has often emphasised knowledge dissemination, risk identification, and problem explanation. Such approaches may increase awareness, but they frequently remain detached from students' lived experience. As a result, they may have a limited impact on deeper psychological processes related to adaptation and identity formation.

Drama education operates through a fundamentally different educational logic. Rather than prioritising explanation or instruction, it engages students in

structured experiential processes. These processes involve action, interaction, and emotional engagement. Students encounter challenges, conflicts, and meaning-making opportunities through participation rather than observation. From this perspective, drama education can be understood as a psychological generative pedagogy. Its developmental effects emerge not from content transmission, but from the activation of psychological processes embedded in experience. Drama integrates multiple ways of making meaning, suggesting a comprehensive experiential mechanism in education [28].

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined in the previous section, this study identifies three interrelated mechanisms through which drama education may promote psychological resilience and self-identity development. These mechanisms are role experience, emotional resonance, and reflective expression. Each mechanism captures a distinct psychological function. At the same time, the mechanisms operate in sequence and interaction, forming an integrated pathway through which experiential participation is translated into developmental outcomes.

#### **4.1 Role Experience as a Mechanism for the Development of Psychological Resilience**

Role experience represents the foundational experiential mechanism of drama education. It refers to learners' engagement with symbolic roles situated within structured dramatic contexts. Through role enactment, students enter scenarios that involve tension, uncertainty, interpersonal conflict, and emotional demand. These scenarios are experienced as meaningful and immersive, while remaining psychologically safe due to their fictional framing [29]. This dual quality enables students to confront challenges without direct personal risk.

From a psychological standpoint, role experience functions as exposure to symbolic adversity. Students are required to respond to situations that mirror real-life stressors, such as failure, disagreement, loss, or moral dilemma. These experiences activate emotional responses and coping demands. However, because the challenges are encountered through a role rather than personal identity, students are afforded psychological distance. This distance allows for observation, regulation, and adjustment of responses. Such processes are central to the development of resilience.

Role experience also supports resilience through experiential rehearsal. Students do not merely discuss coping strategies in abstract terms. They enact them through action. They make decisions, experience consequences within the dramatic frame, and adapt behaviour in response to unfolding situations. This process allows students to experiment with different response patterns. It also enables them to recognise the effects of emotional regulation and behavioural flexibility. Through repeated rehearsal, coping strategies become more accessible and adaptable.

In addition, role experience contributes to the development of self-efficacy. Successfully navigating demanding role situations can generate a sense of competence and agency. This sense of competence is psychologically transferable. It strengthens students' belief in their ability to manage stress and uncertainty beyond the dramatic context. Over time, accumulated experiences of symbolic mastery may support a more resilient orientation toward challenge in everyday life.

Proposition 1. Engagement in role-based simulated adversity within psychologically safe dramatic contexts is positively associated with the development of adaptive coping strategies and enhanced psychological resilience.

Proposition 2. Greater frequency and depth of emotional regulation practice during role enactment predict higher levels of emotional flexibility and stress recovery capacity in real-life situations.

#### **4.2 Emotional Resonance as a Mechanism for Self-Identity Construction**

Emotional resonance constitutes the primary effective and interpersonal mechanism through which drama education influences self-identity development. Emotional resonance arises from shared emotional engagement during collaborative enactment. It involves empathy, affective attunement, and emotional responsiveness among participants. These processes occur through interaction rather than individual cognition alone.

Self-identity develops through the integration of internal experience and social feedback. Drama education creates contexts in which students encounter diverse emotional perspectives. By embodying roles that differ in background, motivation, and values, students experience emotions and viewpoints that may contrast with their own habitual patterns. This exposure allows students to compare themselves and others. It challenges fixed self-perceptions and expands the range of possible self-understandings.

Emotional resonance also contributes to identity construction through experiences of recognition and belonging. When students' emotional expressions are acknowledged within a group, they experience validation. This validation supports self-worth and strengthens social identity. Feeling emotionally recognised reinforces the perception that one's experiences are legitimate and meaningful. Such experiences are particularly important during emerging adulthood, when identity remains open and sensitive to social evaluation.

In addition, emotional resonance facilitates meaning-making. Dramatic narratives often involve value conflict, moral tension, and relational complexity. As students emotionally engage with these narratives, they reflect on questions of responsibility, purpose, and personal direction. Emotional processing enables students to articulate values and priorities. This articulation contributes to the construction of coherent self-narratives,

which are central to stable self-identity.

Proposition 3. Higher levels of empathetic engagement and emotional resonance during collaborative dramatic performance are positively associated with greater clarity of self-concept and stability of self-worth.

Proposition 4. Engagement with emotionally salient value conflicts within dramatic narratives facilitates meaning-making and contributes to more coherent self-narratives and identity commitments.

### **4.3 Reflective Expression as a Mechanism for Integrating Resilience and Self-Identity**

Reflective expression represents the integrative mechanism through which dramatic experience is transformed into enduring psychological resources. Experience alone does not ensure development. Reflection enables learners to interpret, organise, and integrate experience into understanding. Drama education typically incorporates structured opportunities for reflection following enactment. These opportunities may include group discussion, guided questioning, and narrative articulation. Reflection allows students to examine the relationship between role-based action and personal disposition [30]. By comparing how a character responded to a challenge with how they themselves respond, students gain insight into emotional tendencies, coping patterns, and value orientations. This process supports self-awareness and contributes to identity clarification. Reflection thus functions as a bridge between experience and self-understanding.

Reflective expression also supports emotional integration. Dramatic participation often evokes strong affective responses. Without reflection, such responses may remain fragmented. Reflection allows emotions to be named, organised, and regulated. Verbal and symbolic expression reduces emotional residue and promotes coherence. Through this process, emotional experience becomes a resource for learning rather than a source of psychological strain. Furthermore, reflective expression mediates long-term developmental effects. Through articulation and dialogue, students externalise insight and receive feedback. This feedback enables perspective-taking and cognitive reorganisation. Over time, repeated reflective practice contributes to sustained self-regulation, adaptive coping, and identity coherence. Reflective expression, therefore, integrates the effects of role experience and emotional resonance, linking experiential challenge and social engagement to both psychological resilience and self-identity development.

Proposition 5. Structured and guided reflection following dramatic enactment is more effective than unstructured reflection in promoting metacognitive awareness and identity coherence.

Proposition 6. The externalisation and sharing of insight through reflective expression mediate the relationship between dramatic experience and long-term gains in

psychological resilience.

## **5. Practical Pathways of Drama Education**

The contribution of drama education to students' psychological resilience and self-identity does not arise automatically through participation alone. Its developmental value depends on how dramatic activities are structured, implemented, and reflected upon within higher education contexts. A mechanism-based framework requires an implementation logic that aligns educational design with psychological processes. It also requires clarity regarding boundaries. Drama education in this study is positioned as pedagogical, not therapeutic. This positioning matters in practice. It shapes the intensity of activities, the facilitation stance, and the scope of intended outcomes. Translating the proposed framework into practice, therefore, involves curriculum design, instructional processes, and evaluative practices that can sustain psychological engagement without overstepping educational roles. The following sections outline three interrelated practical pathways. They are presented as design-oriented principles. They are intended to be adaptable across disciplines and institutional settings. They also provide a basis for future empirical implementation and evaluation.

### **5.1 Situational Construction and Experiential Guidance in Drama Education Curriculum Design**

Situational construction constitutes the foundation of drama education as a psychologically developmental pedagogy. The design of dramatic situations determines whether students engage at a psychological level or remain at the surface level of performance. The situation is not a decorative container. It is the primary driver of cognitive and emotional demand. From a developmental perspective, effective dramatic situations must balance symbolic challenge and psychological safety [31]. This balance allows students to encounter emotional demand without excessive threat. It is essential for activating resilience-related processes. It is also necessary to enable identity exploration without destabilisation.

Well-designed dramatic situations typically exhibit several characteristics. They are cognitively accessible, allowing students to quickly grasp role relationships and contextual meaning. They contain meaningful tension or conflict, which introduces emotional and motivational demand. They also remain open-ended, permitting multiple responses and interpretations rather than fixed outcomes. Such openness creates space for agency and exploration. It enables students to test coping strategies and value positions within a contained environment. The scenario should also be developmentally appropriate. It should match students' likely stressors and role transitions in higher education. Examples include peer conflict,

academic failure, ethical dilemmas, and uncertainty about future pathways. This alignment increases ecological relevance. It supports transfer of learning beyond the drama context.

Situational construction also functions as a form of boundary setting. Clearly defined dramatic frames help distinguish symbolic experience from everyday reality. This distinction protects learners from emotional overload while preserving experiential intensity. It also supports a stable sense of control. Students know when they are “in role” and when they are “out of role.” This predictability reduces anticipatory anxiety. It allows deeper engagement with emotional material without personal destabilisation. Over time, repeated exposure to well-calibrated situations supports tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. This tolerance is a core component of psychological resilience. It also supports identity work because identity development requires engagement with uncertainty and alternative possibilities.

Experience plays a complementary role in curriculum design. Dramatic situations alone do not guarantee psychological engagement. Guidance is required to support students’ awareness of their own emotional and cognitive processes during enactment [32]. This guidance does not prescribe behaviour or interpretation. It supports process awareness and also helps students attend to how they experience the role, how they respond to challenge, and how they make decisions under symbolic pressure. It also helps students notice avoidance patterns and rigid coping. Instructors can use short prompts. They can invite students to name emotions, intentions, and perceived constraints. They can encourage students to consider choices. Through guided prompts and non-evaluative facilitation, instructors can support deeper role experience and strengthen the connection between action and psychological process. This connection is central to mechanism activation.

Curriculum design should also consider developmental progression. Students differ in emotional readiness, prior experience, and tolerance for symbolic pressure. A gradual increase in situational complexity allows students to build confidence and capacity to build over time. This progression supports resilience development through repeated exposure to manageable challenges. It also provides a scaffold for identity exploration within increasingly complex social and emotional contexts. Differentiation should be explicit. It can include optional role intensity, varied narrative distance, and alternative forms of participation. Such a design reduces exclusion. It also improves psychological safety for students with higher sensitivity. In addition, curriculum planning should consider implementation fidelity. Core elements that activate mechanisms should be identified and protected. These elements include role adoption, meaningful tension, interpersonal interaction, and structured reflection. Preserving these elements helps maintain the integrity of

the pedagogical approach across instructors and cohorts.

## 5.2 Collaborative Performance and Emotional Interaction in Teaching Implementation

Teaching implementation represents the stage at which psychological mechanisms are most directly activated [33]. Implementation determines whether designed situations actually generate the intended psychological processes. Collaborative performance is a defining feature of drama education and a primary condition for emotional resonance [34]. Through collaboration, students are required to attend to others’ actions, emotions, and perspectives. This requirement transforms individual experience into shared psychological engagement. It also shifts the locus of learning from private understanding to relational negotiation. This shift is particularly relevant for university students, whose developmental tasks include social belonging and role formation.

Collaborative performance introduces social interdependence. Students must negotiate meaning, coordinate action, and respond to emotional cues in real time. These processes foster empathy and interpersonal understanding. They also create moments of misattunement and repair. Such moments are psychologically valuable. They provide practice in rupture and reconciliation. Emotional interaction during performance allows students to experience recognition and support from peers. Such experiences contribute to a sense of belonging and social identity. They are closely linked to self-identity development because identity is partly built through reflected appraisal and social positioning. Instructors can support this process by structuring roles and group tasks to ensure participation equity. They can also rotate leadership and listening responsibilities. These practices reduce dominance effects and increase the probability of inclusive emotional resonance.

Importantly, emotional interaction in collaborative performance does not imply unregulated emotional expression. Instead, it occurs within a shared structure that implicitly constrains and organises emotional exchange. This structured interaction supports emotional literacy [35]. Students learn to recognise emotion, interpret cues, and respond in socially appropriate ways. They learn emotional timing and containment. Such emotionally regulated interaction contributes to interpersonal competence and internal emotional stability. It also helps maintain the educational boundary between pedagogy and therapy. Teachers should adopt a facilitative stance and avoid clinical interpretation. They should focus on learning processes, meaning construction, and respectful interaction. When intense reactions occur, the appropriate response is containment and referral rather than therapeutic processing.

Emotional interaction also supports psychological

resilience. Expressing emotion within a shared dramatic context normalises emotional experience and reduces isolation. Peer responses function as a form of emotional containment. They support regulation and recovery when students encounter difficulty or intensity. Through repeated interaction, students learn that emotional challenges can be managed within supportive social environments. This learning strengthens coping flexibility. It also reduces avoidance. It can increase willingness to seek help. These are resilience-relevant outcomes. Implementation should therefore include explicit norms. Norms should cover confidentiality, respectful listening, and non-judgment. Norms should also address consent. Students should have permission to pause, step out of role, or modify participation. Such safeguards protect psychological safety while enabling meaningful engagement.

At the same time, collaborative performance enables a dual level of engagement. Students act within the role while observing their own reactions as individuals. This dual engagement enhances self-awareness and social cognition. It also supports perspective multiplicity. Students can hold conflicting motivations and emotions in mind. This capacity supports identity integration, which requires tolerance for internal complexity. By understanding others through role interaction, students gain insight into themselves. Through repeated collaborative enactment, students may develop greater flexibility in responding to interpersonal challenge, supporting both adaptive coping and identity integration. Implementation quality depends on facilitator competence. Facilitators need skills in group dynamics, emotional pacing, and reflective questioning. Institutions should therefore consider training and supervision mechanisms to ensure consistency and ethical delivery.

### **5.3 Reflection and Continuous Growth in Educational Effectiveness**

Reflection constitutes the central pathway through which dramatic experience is consolidated into enduring psychological resources. Experience alone does not ensure development. Reflection enables students to interpret experience, organise emotion, and integrate insight into self-understanding. In drama education, reflection should be structured and intentional rather than incidental. It should be planned as part of the lesson architecture. It should occur at predictable points. It should be psychologically safe. It should emphasise inquiry over evaluation. This structure supports the reflective expression mechanism and increases the likelihood of durable outcomes.

Reflective practices may include guided discussion, written reflection, and symbolic expression. These practices encourage students to revisit emotional responses, examine behavioural choices, and consider alternative perspectives. Reflection supports metacognitive awareness by helping students identify

patterns in how they respond to stress, conflict, and uncertainty. This awareness is critical for psychological resilience because regulation begins with recognition. It is also critical for self-identity because identity coherence requires articulation of values, motives, and boundaries. Reflection should therefore include prompts that connect enactment to personal meaning. It should also include prompts that connect enactment to future action. Such prompts facilitate transfer. They help students move from episodic experience to generalised coping and identity resources.

From a developmental standpoint, reflective practice also supports temporal integration of experience. Reflection enables students to connect past enactments with present understanding and anticipated future action. This temporal linkage is essential for constructing coherent self-narratives. By situating individual experiences within a broader personal trajectory, reflection contributes to the continuity and stability of self-identity over time. It also supports resilience because resilient coping often depends on meaning-making and narrative coherence after adversity. Reflection can be strengthened through iterative cycles. Students revisit themes across sessions. They test revised strategies in new enactments. They then reflect again. This cycle supports consolidation and refinement of psychological resources.

Educational evaluation in drama education should prioritise developmental processes over performance outcomes [36]. Traditional evaluative criteria focused on technical skill or correctness may undermine psychological safety. Process-oriented evaluation emphasises engagement, reflection, and growth. Tools such as reflective journals, learning portfolios, and peer feedback make psychological development visible over time. Visibility of growth reinforces self-efficacy. It supports the formation of adaptive self-narratives. Evaluation also serves an institutional function. It provides evidence of educational value. It supports curriculum legitimacy. It can guide improvement. To avoid superficial measurement, evaluation should include indicators aligned with the proposed mechanisms. Indicators can assess perceived psychological safety, depth of role engagement, quality of emotional interaction, and reflective integration. These indicators are not clinical measures. They are educationally appropriate process measures.

Continuous growth requires continuity across learning experiences. Drama education should be understood as an ongoing developmental process rather than a single intervention. Repeated cycles of enactment, reflection, and feedback allow students to consolidate coping strategies and identity-related insights. Over time, these cycles support transfer of psychological resources from dramatic contexts to everyday academic and social life, contributing to sustained psychological resilience and a more coherent self-identity. Sustainability also requires

institutional embedding. Drama-based modules can be integrated into general education, student development programs, or co-curricular mental health promotion initiatives [37]. Coordination with student support services is also relevant. Clear referral pathways should exist for students who experience distress beyond the educational scope. Such coordination maintains ethical boundaries while enabling drama education to contribute meaningfully to student psychological development.

## 6. Conclusion

This study developed a mechanism-based conceptual framework to explain how drama education may promote psychological resilience and self-identity development among university students. Drawing on educational psychology, developmental theory, and drama pedagogy, the framework specifies three interrelated psychological mechanisms—role experience, emotional resonance, and reflective expression—through which drama-based learning can function as a psychologically developmental pedagogy in higher education. Rather than focusing on outcomes alone, the analysis clarifies the internal processes through which experiential participation is translated into adaptive psychological resources.

At a conceptual level, this study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it moves beyond descriptive accounts of the benefits of drama education by articulating the psychological mechanisms that underlie its developmental effects. By specifying how role enactment supports coping rehearsal, how emotional resonance contributes to self-worth and meaning-making, and how reflective expression consolidates experience into self-narratives, the framework provides an explanatory structure that integrates emotion, cognition, and social interaction. Second, the study bridges research on psychological resilience and self-identity, two constructs that are often examined separately, by demonstrating how they can be jointly supported through shared experiential and reflective processes. This integrative perspective highlights the value of educational approaches that address multiple dimensions of psychological development simultaneously.

The study also makes a pedagogical contribution by translating psychological mechanisms into design-oriented principles for higher education practice. By clarifying how situational construction, collaborative enactment, and structured reflection activate developmental processes, the framework guides educators seeking to incorporate drama-based approaches into curricula and student development initiatives. Importantly, drama education is conceptualised here as a pedagogical,

rather than therapeutic, practice. This distinction establishes clear boundaries regarding the scope of educational responsibility and helps prevent the conflation of drama education with clinical intervention. The framework emphasises psychological development within educational contexts, not the treatment of mental disorders.

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. As a conceptual analysis, the framework does not offer empirical evidence regarding the magnitude or variability of outcomes associated with drama education. The proposed mechanisms are theoretically derived and require empirical validation across diverse institutional, cultural, and disciplinary contexts. In addition, the framework does not account for all individual differences that may shape students' responses to drama-based learning, such as prior emotional vulnerability, cultural norms surrounding expression, or differential access to psychological support. These factors may moderate how mechanisms are activated in practice.

Future research can build on this framework in several directions. Empirical studies may test the proposed propositions using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs. Longitudinal research could examine how repeated engagement with drama-based learning influences the stability of psychological resilience and self-identity over time. Intervention studies may compare different forms of drama pedagogy to assess which design features most effectively activate specific mechanisms. Further research may also explore boundary conditions, such as the role of facilitator expertise, institutional support, and ethical safeguards, in shaping implementation quality and developmental impact.

In conclusion, this study positions drama education as a pedagogical approach with distinct psychological developmental potential in higher education. By specifying mechanisms, clarifying boundaries, and outlining pathways for future inquiry, the framework provides a foundation for both theoretical advancement and empirical investigation. As universities continue to seek educational practices that support students' psychological adaptation and identity development, mechanism-based conceptual work of this kind can contribute to more intentional, ethically grounded, and developmentally informed approaches to student well-being.

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