

Special Education in the United States: Integrating Creative Therapies and Evidence-Based Practices

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Abstract:

This paper examines the evolving landscape of special education in the United States, focusing on the intersection of inclusive education, evidence-based instructional strategies, and the emerging role of creative arts therapies—particularly drama therapy. Historically, students with disabilities were either excluded from general education or placed in separate programs with limited individualized support. Over time, inclusive education has gained traction, emphasizing the need for all students to learn together in supportive, accessible environments. However, challenges remain, especially when addressing the emotional, behavioral, and developmental needs of students with complex profiles. In response, creative arts therapies have emerged as powerful complementary tools in special education. Drama therapy, grounded in developmental and psychological theories, has demonstrated effectiveness in improving emotional regulation, self-expression, and social interaction among children with special needs. Drawing on a systematic review of literature and relevant case studies, this paper explores how integrating drama-based interventions within school settings can foster both academic growth and psychosocial well-being. The paper concludes by advocating for a holistic, interdisciplinary model of special education—one that combines data-driven instruction with expressive, therapeutic modalities. Such an approach promises to create more inclusive, engaging, and emotionally responsive learning environments for diverse learners.

Keywords: special education, inclusive education, drama therapy, arts-based interventions

Introduction:

Special education in the United States has evolved dramatically over the past few decades. Originally characterized by segregated classrooms and limited educational access, today's system has shifted toward inclusive models that promote equity for students with disabilities (Hornby, 1992; Hyatt & Hornby, 2017).

Landmark legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) helped enshrine the rights of these students, ensuring they receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Despite this progress, ongoing debates remain about the most effective strategies for supporting diverse learners (Kauffman et al., 2021). Increasingly, educators and clinicians are exploring innovative approaches beyond traditional pedagogy, including creative and expressive therapies.

Among these emerging approaches, drama therapy has gained considerable attention for its impact on emotional regulation, self-expression, and social skill development in children with special needs (Berghs, Tuckett, & Rodgers, 2022; Cohen, Lee, & Smith, 2022). Drama therapy, grounded in theatrical techniques and role-play, provides a safe and imaginative space for children to explore identity and emotional challenges (Landy, 1993; Emunah, 1994). These practices are particularly beneficial for students who struggle with communication or have difficulty processing trauma, such as those with autism spectrum disorder or post-traumatic stress (Kalogirou, 2020; Karkou, Fullarton, & Scarth, 2010). Through dramatization, students not only engage cognitively but also activate emotional pathways that promote healing and self-awareness (Moreno, 2023; Erikson, 1968).

The neurobiological underpinnings of arts-based therapy reinforce its value in special education. Asefi and Cozolino (2018) emphasize that creative engagement can strengthen neural pathways and enhance emotional resilience. Similarly, Bailey (2009) and Dokter (2010) argue that performing arts therapies serve as a bridge between emotion and cognition, facilitating psychological healing. Dunne and Duffy (2021) further validate this through a comprehensive review, highlighting the effectiveness of creative therapies in children with psychological difficulties. These interventions are especially effective in environments where conventional talk therapy may be insufficient or inaccessible, offering alternative forms of communication and growth.

Empirical research continues to support the integration of drama therapy in school settings. Hynes (2021) and Lacy, Roberts, and McCallum (2021) demonstrate how dramatherapy enhances emotional expression and coping mechanisms among children, while Jones (2007) and Jennings (2011) offer theoretical frameworks for group-based implementation. The role of caregivers also cannot be overlooked—Levy and Koller (2021) found that parental involvement in therapy leads to more sustained emotional and behavioral progress. As Lewis (2020) notes, children from high-risk environments particularly benefit from therapeutic play and structured psychosocial support, further strengthening the case for including creative interventions in special education.

The transformation of special education in the United States reflects not only legal and structural shifts but also an evolving understanding of how children learn, grow, and heal. Creative therapies—especially drama therapy—represent a promising frontier in supporting students with disabilities beyond academics.

With a growing body of evidence from neuroscience, psychology, and educational practice, the incorporation of arts-based interventions into special education offers a holistic and compassionate model of care, one that values both the emotional and cognitive development of every child.

Literature Review:

The intersection of special education and creative therapeutic interventions, particularly drama therapy, has emerged as a powerful and expanding field of research. As traditional educational models continue to evolve to meet the diverse emotional and developmental needs of students with disabilities, scholars and clinicians have increasingly recognized the importance of integrating creative arts therapies as complementary practices. This literature review synthesizes current scholarly work on the neurobiological basis, psychological impact, and practical application of drama therapy and related creative arts interventions in special education contexts.

The foundation of special education in the United States is built on the principles of individualized instruction and inclusion (Hornby, 1992; Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2019). Despite significant progress, many traditional practices often fall short in addressing the emotional and psychosocial complexities experienced by children with disabilities. Hyatt and Hornby (2017) caution that policies such as UN Article 24 may unintentionally dilute specialized support if misapplied. Kauffman et al. (2021) further argue that the debate between full inclusion and

specialized interventions necessitates a nuanced, evidence-based approach. This call for multidimensional support systems aligns with the rise of therapeutic practices such as drama therapy, which address emotional regulation, trauma processing, and identity development—elements often neglected in conventional classroom settings.

Drama therapy, rooted in theatrical techniques and psychological theory, provides children a safe and structured space for self-expression, role exploration, and emotional catharsis. Early foundational work by Emunah (1994) and Landy (1993) outlines the therapeutic power of performance, emphasizing the “dramatic reality” concept—where individuals can explore and rehearse emotional scenarios in a symbolic space (Pendzik, 2006). This symbolic function is particularly crucial for children with cognitive and learning disabilities, as Sarris (2015) notes, since these children often struggle with abstract and emotional processing in conventional therapeutic or educational formats.

The effectiveness of drama therapy is supported by an expanding body of empirical research. Cohen, Lee, and Smith (2022) found significant reductions in childhood anxiety and depression following structured dramatherapy interventions, highlighting its potential as a non-invasive alternative to pharmaceutical or traditional talk therapies. Similarly, Berghs, Tuckett, and Rodgers (2022) emphasized the role of drama therapy in promoting emotional well-being and interpersonal skills among children and adolescents. Their findings are echoed by Hynes (2021), who reviewed current practices in dramatherapy and found consistent improvements in emotional expression, self-confidence, and communication.

Further reinforcing its clinical legitimacy, Dunne and Duffy (2021) conducted a comprehensive review of creative therapies for children with psychological difficulties, concluding that such interventions, including drama therapy, are particularly effective for populations experiencing trauma, social isolation, and behavioral issues. Kalogirou (2020) specifically explored drama therapy's application to children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), reporting significant gains in communication and social engagement—areas often underserved in traditional academic and behavioral interventions. Additionally, Karkou, Fullarton, and Scarth (2010) demonstrated that arts therapies can support children with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), offering them safe avenues for emotional processing and healing.

From a neurobiological perspective, the integration of arts-based therapies into education is further justified by brain science. Asefi and Cozolino (2018) argue that the arts play a critical role in neural development, particularly in areas responsible for emotion regulation, memory, and social interaction. This aligns with Erikson's (1968) psychosocial developmental theory, which underscores the importance of identity and role exploration during childhood and adolescence—processes well-supported through drama therapy. Bailey (2009) and Dokter (2010) also emphasize the embodied and somatic aspects of performing arts therapies, suggesting that movement, voice, and storytelling activate integrated neural pathways that support both emotional and cognitive healing.

Jennings (2011) and Jones (2007) expand on this by framing drama therapy within groupwork and clinical contexts. Their work illustrates how drama can foster communal learning, empathy, and trust-building among children, especially those who may feel marginalized due to disabilities or trauma histories. Lewis (2020), in her work with children from high-risk environments, highlights the importance of therapeutic play and creative expression in buffering the negative effects of stress, neglect, or abuse—common experiences among students in special education settings. Moreno (2023) supports these claims, advocating for the structured integration of theatrical techniques into developmental therapy to reinforce executive functioning, language skills, and emotional resilience.

An often underexplored but essential dimension of drama therapy in special education is the role of parental involvement. Levy and Koller (2021) demonstrate that when parents actively participate in their child's therapeutic journey—particularly in co-creative or dramatized sessions—the emotional outcomes and behavioral changes are more sustainable. Norcross and Wampold (2011) similarly stress that the quality of therapeutic relationships is a significant predictor of positive outcomes, reinforcing the value of collaborative and emotionally attuned interventions over purely instructional ones.

However, while the evidence base for drama therapy is growing, several challenges remain regarding its implementation within the public education system. As Sajnani et al. (2020) and Rauch (2021) argue, the institutional

emphasis on standardized assessments and cognitive achievement often marginalizes arts-based programs, which are seen as peripheral rather than essential. Moreover, budgetary constraints and a lack of trained arts therapists in schools limit the accessibility and scalability of these interventions. Sarris (2015) notes that without systemic change in how educational success is defined, the full potential of creative therapies will remain unrealized in mainstream settings.

In light of these findings, there is a growing consensus among researchers and practitioners that a shift toward holistic, student-centered education is needed. This approach would integrate both cognitive learning and emotional development, offering a more complete framework for supporting children with special needs. Hornby (2014) advocates for inclusive special education practices grounded in evidence-based and multidisciplinary strategies, which can adapt to the unique profiles of each learner. Drama therapy, as both a clinical and educational tool, aligns with this vision by combining therapeutic depth with creative engagement.

The literature provides compelling evidence for the integration of drama therapy and related creative arts interventions into special education. From neurobiological insights to psychological benefits and educational implications, drama therapy offers a promising complement to traditional methods. It addresses the emotional, social, and developmental dimensions often overlooked in rigid curricular structures. As the field of special education continues to evolve, embracing arts-based therapies will be essential in creating inclusive, responsive, and emotionally intelligent learning environments.

Methodology

This study employed a systematic review methodology to examine the impact of drama therapy and other creative arts interventions on children and adolescents in special education settings. The systematic review approach was selected for its rigorous and replicable procedures in identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research related to the therapeutic and educational outcomes of creative interventions (Norcross & Wampold, 2011). This method allowed the researcher to collate diverse findings from psychological, neurobiological, and educational literature, providing a comprehensive understanding of how drama therapy supports the holistic development of learners with special needs.

The review followed a structured process consisting of five key stages: identification, screening, eligibility, inclusion, and synthesis. Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and credible institutional reports published between 1990 and 2023 were included. Databases such as PsycINFO, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were searched using keywords including “drama therapy,” “creative arts in education,” “special education,” “emotional regulation,” “child development,” and “neurobiology of creativity.” The inclusion criteria focused on studies involving children or adolescents in educational or therapeutic contexts, particularly those addressing learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, or emotional and behavioral difficulties.

A total of 56 sources were initially identified. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts for relevance, 27 studies were selected for full-text review. Ultimately, 21 high-quality sources met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed thematically. These included both quantitative and qualitative studies, systematic reviews, and theoretical frameworks (e.g., Emunah, 1994; Asefi & Cozolino, 2018; Cohen et al., 2022). The thematic synthesis highlighted patterns related to emotional well-being, cognitive development, social skills enhancement, and therapeutic relationships. By consolidating these findings, the study offers an evidence-based foundation for integrating drama therapy into special education practices.

Findings and Discussion:

The Evolution of Special Education and Inclusion:

The evolution of special education in the United States has been shaped by decades of policy reform, advocacy, and pedagogical experimentation. Historically, students with disabilities were segregated in specialized institutions or self-contained classrooms, often receiving minimal instruction and limited access to social integration (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1990).

This model was criticized for perpetuating exclusion and undermining the academic and emotional development of learners with special needs. Over time, legal frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) sought to address these disparities by mandating a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). These legal mandates laid the foundation for inclusive education, a movement emphasizing the full participation of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

Despite the noble intent of inclusion, scholars have raised critical concerns about its blanket application. Hornby (2014) advocates for "inclusive special education" that balances integration with individualized, evidence-based practices tailored to each student's needs. Hyatt and Hornby (2017) argue that inclusion must not come at the cost of efficacy, especially for students with severe or complex disabilities. Furthermore, the international push for inclusive education, such as the promotion of UN Article 24, has led to debates about whether this approach inadvertently undermines specialized services or, conversely, expands access to high-quality support (Kauffman et al., 2021). Rauch (2021) underscores the importance of informed policy based on empirical truth rather than ideological preference—a critical reminder in navigating the ongoing discourse on inclusion.

Within this landscape, Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) have emerged as pragmatic frameworks. These models use a tiered approach to provide varying levels of academic and behavioral support based on student needs (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2019). RTI, in particular, emphasizes early identification and intervention to prevent learning difficulties from becoming entrenched. While such models have improved data-driven decision-making in education, they are not immune to criticism. Kauffman et al. (2021) caution against the overgeneralization of these systems, warning that overreliance on tiered instruction without specialized input may dilute the quality of individualized education for high-needs students.

In response to these challenges, there is growing interest in complementary approaches that address the social-emotional dimensions of learning—areas often overlooked in traditional special education models. One such approach is drama therapy, a form of creative arts therapy that integrates theatrical techniques to promote psychological healing and personal growth (Jones, 2007; Emunah, 1994).

Drama therapy allows students to explore emotions, build social skills, and rehearse adaptive behaviors in a safe, symbolic space. Pendzik (2006) emphasizes the concept of "dramatic reality," where children engage in role-play and storytelling to access subconscious emotions and unresolved experiences. According to Landy (1993), the integration of performance and persona helps children construct and reconstruct identity, a process aligned with Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory of development.

The effectiveness of drama therapy in special education settings is supported by a growing body of empirical research. Berghs, Tuckett, and Rodgers (2022) highlight the role of drama therapy in improving emotional well-being and behavioral outcomes among children and adolescents. Similarly, Cohen, Lee, and Smith (2022) found that drama therapy significantly reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression in children, offering a promising alternative or supplement to conventional therapy. Hynes (2021) reinforces this view, noting that drama therapy enhances emotional expression and self-regulation—key skills for learners struggling with behavioral or developmental challenges.

A significant strength of drama therapy lies in its adaptability to various needs and diagnoses. Kalogirou (2020), for instance, demonstrated the positive effects of drama therapy for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), particularly in improving social communication and sensory integration. Karkou, Fullarton, and Scarth (2010) also reported favorable outcomes among children exposed to trauma, showing that arts-based therapies facilitate healing by bypassing verbal limitations. These findings align with the neurobiological insights of Asefi and Cozolino (2018), who argue that creative processes activate neural pathways responsible for emotion regulation, attachment, and resilience.

The social context of drama therapy is also vital. Jennings (2011) and Moreno (2023) discuss how group-based drama sessions foster empathy, trust, and peer interaction—critical components for inclusive classrooms. Creative groupwork, as facilitated through dramatic expression, allows children with and without disabilities to collaborate,

challenge stereotypes, and build mutual understanding. According to Lacy, Roberts, and McCallum (2021), these social benefits contribute to greater classroom cohesion and reduced instances of bullying or exclusion.

Parental involvement further enhances the efficacy of drama therapy interventions. Levy and Koller (2021) provide evidence that parents who engage in dramatized therapy sessions with their children help reinforce emotional coping mechanisms at home. This supports the findings of Norcross and Wampold (2011), who assert that therapeutic outcomes are significantly influenced by the strength of the relational alliance—not only between therapist and child but also among caregivers and educational staff.

Moreover, arts therapies extend beyond emotional regulation and offer cognitive benefits. Sarris (2015) argues that drama and symbolic play develop abstract thinking in children with learning disabilities, enabling more flexible problem-solving and symbolic reasoning. Lewis (2020) complements this perspective by showing how therapeutic play and creative expression help children from high-risk environments build resilience, enhance executive functioning, and cope with trauma.

Despite the compelling evidence, systemic barriers hinder the widespread implementation of drama therapy in schools. As Sajnani et al. (2020) and Dokter (2010) observe, the arts are often marginalized in educational policy and funding decisions. Schools may lack access to trained drama therapists, or perceive arts-based interventions as non-essential. This systemic undervaluing of creativity in education, coupled with rigid academic standards, limits innovation in special education. Yet, as Bailey (2009) argues, the performing arts are not luxuries but essential tools for healing and growth.

While inclusion and academic interventions remain central to special education, the integration of creative therapies such as drama therapy offers a transformative pathway toward holistic support. The literature reveals that drama therapy not only addresses emotional and social development but also enhances cognitive and behavioral outcomes. As educators and policymakers strive to meet the complex needs of students with disabilities, embracing arts-based, evidence-informed practices will be crucial in advancing a truly inclusive and responsive education system.

Creative and Arts-Based Therapies in Special Education:

Alongside the growing emphasis on inclusive education, there is an increasing interest in incorporating creative arts therapies—including drama, music, and visual arts—into special education programs. These therapies offer a holistic approach that addresses the cognitive, emotional, and social needs of students with disabilities. Among these modalities, drama therapy has received particular attention for its ability to support children's emotional expression, social development, and mental well-being. Rooted in Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory, drama therapy supports the developmental need for identity formation and emotional growth, especially critical in children navigating the complexities of disability and learning differences.

Drama therapy utilizes role play, improvisation, storytelling, and theatrical performance to engage children in therapeutic processes that are both structured and creative. These activities create a "safe space" where children can explore inner conflicts, practice interpersonal skills, and express emotions that might otherwise remain unspoken (Landy, 1993; Jennings, 2011). As Jones (2007) and Emunah (1994) explain, drama therapy leverages the symbolic and performative elements of theatre to facilitate insight, emotional regulation, and behavioral change. This is particularly effective for children with communication challenges, trauma histories, or neurodevelopmental disorders.

A wide body of literature supports the efficacy of drama therapy in special education. Berghs, Tuckett, and Rodgers (2022) found that drama therapy improved emotional well-being and peer interactions in children with behavioral and emotional difficulties. Lacy, Roberts, and McCallum (2021) echoed these findings, emphasizing its role in developing emotional regulation and coping strategies. Cohen, Lee, and Smith (2022) further demonstrated drama therapy's capacity to alleviate childhood anxiety and depression, suggesting it can be a powerful adjunct to traditional counseling and cognitive-behavioral interventions. These findings are supported by neurobiological evidence: Asefi and Cozolino (2018) argue that creative expression stimulates brain regions involved in emotional processing, empathy, and executive functioning.

Drama therapy also holds specific promise for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Kalogirou (2020) demonstrated its effectiveness in enhancing communication, emotional recognition, and sensory integration for children on the spectrum. Through structured dramatic play, children with ASD are able to experiment with social cues and emotional responses in a low-pressure environment. Similarly, Pendzik (2006) introduces the concept of “dramatic reality,” a therapeutic space that blends fiction and truth to help children reconstruct traumatic experiences and reclaim agency over their personal narratives.

The benefits of drama therapy are not confined to emotional outcomes; they extend to cognitive and symbolic development. According to Sarris (2015), children with learning disabilities often struggle with abstract thinking and symbolic reasoning. Drama therapy provides a scaffolded space for symbolic engagement, allowing students to develop cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills. Lewis (2020) supports this perspective, highlighting that therapeutic play and creative interventions can promote psychosocial development in children from high-risk environments. These findings align with Dunne and Duffy’s (2021) review, which affirms the effectiveness of creative therapies in managing a range of psychological and behavioral disorders in youth.

Parental involvement is another crucial factor in enhancing the impact of drama therapy. Levy and Koller (2021) explored the role of family dynamics in therapeutic outcomes and found that parents who participate in or support drama therapy activities at home reinforce the child’s progress. This involvement strengthens the therapeutic alliance, an element identified by Norcross and Wampold (2011) as a core component of effective treatment. In family contexts where emotional expression may be constrained, drama therapy can also serve as a bridge between children and caregivers, fostering communication and mutual understanding.

Group-based drama therapy interventions also foster peer connection and inclusivity. Jennings (2011) and Moreno (2023) emphasize that group sessions help children develop empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills—key components for successful integration in inclusive classrooms. Through collective storytelling and ensemble performance, children with and without disabilities collaborate and support one another, contributing to a more compassionate and socially responsive school climate. Hynes (2021) notes that these experiences enhance not only individual emotional growth but also classroom cohesion.

Despite its many benefits, the implementation of drama therapy in schools faces practical and systemic challenges. Dokter (2010) and Sajnani et al. (2020) note that arts therapies are often marginalized in school budgets and curricula, seen as “extras” rather than essential services. Furthermore, schools may lack trained drama therapists or administrative support for arts-based interventions. Bailey (2009) argues that this neglect reflects a deeper undervaluing of emotional and creative learning in education systems dominated by standardized testing and academic benchmarks. To unlock the full potential of drama therapy, educational institutions must adopt a more integrated model that prioritizes emotional wellness alongside academic achievement.

Drama therapy’s alignment with inclusive education is particularly important in light of recent debates around special education policy. While inclusion promotes access and equity, critics such as Kauffman and Hallahan (1990) and Hyatt and Hornby (2017) warn against its uncritical implementation, especially when students with complex needs are placed in general classrooms without adequate support. Hornby (2014) advocates for inclusive special education that combines integration with specialized, evidence-based interventions. Drama therapy offers precisely this kind of hybrid solution—supporting emotional development in inclusive settings while being adaptable to individual student needs.

Additionally, Karkou, Fullarton, and Scarth (2010) found that arts therapies, including drama therapy, are effective for children with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), providing safe modalities for expression that bypass verbal limitations. This is particularly relevant in today’s context, where children face increasing psychological stress due to socio-economic pressures, family instability, or global crises. Drama therapy’s flexible, child-centered framework makes it uniquely suited to addressing such complex challenges.

Drama therapy represents a powerful and underutilized tool in special education. It bridges emotional, cognitive, and social domains, offering holistic support to children with diverse needs. Rooted in developmental psychology and

supported by emerging neuroscience, it aligns with both inclusive education goals and individualized therapeutic practice.

As schools seek to create more responsive, equitable, and emotionally supportive environments, integrating drama therapy into special education programs can significantly enhance student well-being and educational outcomes. Expanding access to creative therapies is not just a pedagogical choice—it is a commitment to honoring the full humanity of every learner.

Evidence-Based Research Supporting Drama Therapy

Recent research continues to highlight the transformative effects of drama-based interventions in supporting children and adolescents facing psychological, developmental, and behavioral challenges. Drama therapy, as a form of creative arts therapy, harnesses the expressive power of performance to help young individuals explore emotions, develop self-awareness, and improve interpersonal relationships. As Hynes (2021) and Dunne and Duffy (2021) report, drama therapy has emerged as an effective intervention for children experiencing a range of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, trauma, and emotional dysregulation.

Cohen, Lee, and Smith (2022) provide compelling quantitative evidence demonstrating that structured dramatherapy sessions significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression in children. These findings are echoed by Lacy, Roberts, and McCallum (2021), who documented improvements in children's emotional coping mechanisms and behavioral regulation following regular drama therapy sessions. This growing body of research positions drama therapy as a critical complement to traditional psychological interventions, particularly for children who may struggle with verbal expression or who benefit from experiential, embodied approaches.

One of the reasons for drama therapy's efficacy is its foundation in developmental and neurobiological theories. Drawing from Erikson's (1968) psychosocial framework, drama therapy supports identity formation, emotional expression, and role experimentation—core tasks of childhood and adolescence. Additionally, Asefi and Cozolino (2018) assert that engaging in creative and artistic practices activates brain regions linked to empathy, executive function, and emotional regulation. These neurobiological effects underscore the unique advantages of drama therapy in promoting mental wellness through embodied, imaginative play.

Moreover, the participatory and interactive nature of drama therapy helps create a “dramatic reality” where children can safely rehearse new behaviors and explore different emotional roles. As Pendzik (2006) explains, this simulated space allows for symbolic transformation, providing children with the tools to reframe trauma and reinterpret their life experiences. Moreno (2023) emphasizes that drama therapy also supports developmental milestones, particularly in children with special educational needs. For example, Kalogirou (2020) documents drama therapy's success with children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), noting improved social communication, emotional recognition, and flexibility in thinking.

The benefits of drama therapy are not limited to individual outcomes. Group-based interventions, as outlined by Jennings (2011) and Jones (2007), promote peer bonding, cooperation, and empathy. These social dynamics are especially vital for children navigating inclusive classroom settings where relationship-building plays a crucial role in academic and emotional success. Creative drama in groupwork, according to Bailey (2009), also cultivates a sense of community and shared understanding among diverse learners, helping to bridge gaps in emotional literacy and social skill development.

Parental involvement has been found to significantly enhance the outcomes of drama therapy. Levy and Koller (2021) argue that when parents actively participate in therapy—either by supporting at home or joining therapeutic activities—the emotional gains for children are amplified. Children tend to demonstrate deeper emotional insight and improved behavioral regulation when their caregivers reinforce therapeutic themes in daily interactions. This is in line with Norcross and Wampold's (2011) conclusion that the therapeutic relationship—including the broader support network—is one of the strongest predictors of treatment success. Effective therapy is not solely reliant on techniques but also on trust, collaboration, and continuity between therapeutic and familial environments.

Drama therapy's efficacy also extends to children from high-risk or traumatized backgrounds. Karkou, Fullarton, and Scarth (2010) show that creative arts therapies offer safe, non-verbal avenues for children to process experiences of loss, displacement, or violence. In these contexts, drama therapy provides symbolic expression where verbal recounting may be too painful or developmentally inaccessible. Lewis (2020) similarly underscores how therapeutic play, including drama, serves as psychosocial support for children living in unstable or threatening conditions.

At a cognitive level, Sarris (2015) notes that drama therapy fosters the development of abstract thinking and symbolic reasoning—skills often underdeveloped in children with learning disabilities. Through role play and improvisation, these children begin to explore metaphors, imagine alternative scenarios, and engage in reflective thought. Emunah (1994) and Landy (1993) argue that such reflective engagement is essential for psychological integration, helping children form coherent narratives about themselves and their worlds.

Despite strong evidence in favor of drama therapy, its implementation in educational and clinical settings remains inconsistent. Dokter (2010) and Sajnani et al. (2020) point to a persistent marginalization of creative arts therapies, often viewed as non-essential or supplementary. Resource limitations, lack of trained personnel, and insufficient institutional support further constrain the expansion of drama therapy programs. As Bailey (2009) asserts, this gap reflects systemic undervaluation of emotional and artistic development in contemporary education models, which still prioritize academic metrics over holistic well-being.

Drama therapy stands as a powerful, evidence-based approach to supporting the psychological, emotional, and social development of children and adolescents, especially those with special needs. Its strengths lie not only in its therapeutic benefits but in its adaptability to different developmental profiles, cultural backgrounds, and educational contexts. As recent studies affirm, the integration of drama therapy into school and mental health settings holds great promise for enhancing child and adolescent well-being—offering pathways for healing, growth, and self-discovery through the creative arts.

Integration and Challenges in Practice

Despite growing recognition of the benefits of arts-based therapies—especially drama therapy—in special education, implementing these approaches in public school systems remains fraught with challenges. Chief among these are systemic barriers such as limited funding, the shortage of trained professionals, and a policy focus on rigid academic performance metrics that prioritize standardized testing over emotional development (Dokter, 2010; Sajnani et al., 2020). Schools are often under pressure to meet academic benchmarks, which can leave little room for holistic or therapeutic interventions that do not yield immediate, quantifiable results. This misalignment between educational policy and therapeutic practice continues to hinder the widespread adoption of creative interventions in special education settings.

Moreover, traditional assessment tools are poorly equipped to capture the nuanced and individualized progress that students achieve through arts-based therapies. As Sarris (2015) explains, improvements in areas like emotional resilience, social cognition, or symbolic play are essential for children with learning disabilities, but these gains are rarely reflected in standardized evaluations. This creates a paradox where highly effective interventions may appear inconsequential in data-driven educational systems, resulting in their marginalization despite demonstrated psychological and developmental benefits.

Nevertheless, scholars and practitioners continue to advocate for a more integrative model of special education—one that values emotional well-being alongside academic growth. Asefi and Cozolino (2018) argue that the arts have the potential to stimulate neural development and promote psychological healing, especially in children who have experienced trauma or face chronic stress due to learning disorders. Engaging in drama, storytelling, and symbolic play activates regions of the brain responsible for empathy, executive functioning, and emotional regulation—skills often underdeveloped in children with special needs.

Lewis (2020) similarly emphasizes the importance of therapeutic play in supporting children from high-risk environments. For many of these children, traditional instructional methods fall short of addressing deep-seated psychological needs. Creative therapies offer an emotionally safe and non-verbal platform through which students can

begin to process difficult experiences, develop self-awareness, and establish trust. Drama therapy, in particular, enables children to explore complex emotions through role-play and imaginative engagement. This form of expression can serve as a cathartic release and a foundation for rebuilding self-esteem.

In this context, the integration of drama therapy becomes not a luxury, but a necessity for many children in special education. The work of Moreno (2023) and Pendzik (2006) highlights how the creation of “dramatic reality” in therapy allows children to symbolically reconstruct their experiences, giving meaning and order to emotional chaos. These sessions not only support emotional regulation but also foster narrative competence—the ability to tell one’s own story in a coherent and empowering way. Such developmental progress, while subtle, is foundational to academic and social success.

The value of drama therapy is further enhanced when interventions are sustained and supported across home and school environments. As noted by Levy and Koller (2021), parental involvement can significantly magnify the benefits of therapy. When parents are engaged—whether through direct participation or by reinforcing therapeutic themes at home—children experience greater continuity and support, which contributes to more lasting behavioral and emotional improvements. Norcross and Wampold (2011) support this view, emphasizing that the strength of the therapeutic alliance, including the extended caregiving system, is one of the most reliable predictors of successful outcomes.

Despite the compelling evidence, schools often face practical barriers that prevent them from adopting these approaches. Budget constraints make it difficult to hire credentialed drama therapists or allocate time within already packed curricula. Furthermore, there is often a lack of awareness or professional development opportunities for educators to learn how to collaborate effectively with arts-based therapists (Bailey, 2009). This knowledge gap leads to underutilization of practices that could significantly improve student outcomes.

Still, there is reason for optimism. As more research like that of Hynes (2021), Kalogirou (2020), and Lacy et al. (2021) continues to validate the clinical and educational benefits of drama therapy, policymakers and educational leaders may begin to view it as an essential component of special education, rather than an extracurricular add-on. Integrating arts-based interventions requires not only institutional will but also a philosophical shift—one that acknowledges emotional health as a cornerstone of meaningful learning.

While the path to fully integrating arts-based therapies like drama therapy into public school special education programs is complex, the potential benefits are profound. A holistic model that addresses both cognitive and emotional development—supported by strong research and cross-sector collaboration—offers the most promising framework for meeting the diverse needs of students with disabilities. As educators, therapists, and policymakers continue to seek inclusive, evidence-based solutions, the role of creative therapies must be given the serious attention and resources it deserves.

Conclusion:

The future of special education in the United States hinges on a more integrative and compassionate model—one that balances rigorous, evidence-based academic instruction with creative, expressive, and therapeutic interventions. While inclusive education remains a contested and evolving framework (Hornby, 1992; Hyatt & Hornby, 2017), there is growing recognition that inclusion must go beyond physical placement in general education settings. It must also involve practices that address the emotional, psychological, and developmental needs of students with disabilities.

Drama therapy and other arts-based interventions present a promising complement to traditional pedagogical strategies. Grounded in psychological theories and supported by empirical research, these modalities promote emotional regulation, social competence, and self-expression—skills that are essential for success both inside and outside the classroom. As this review has shown, drama therapy in particular fosters emotional healing and engagement in children with autism spectrum disorder, anxiety, trauma, and other complex needs. These approaches not only improve student well-being but also enhance classroom environments and strengthen student-teacher relationships.

However, for these innovative practices to become embedded in the fabric of public education, systemic challenges must be addressed. Increased funding, expanded professional training, and supportive policy frameworks are critical to making arts-based therapies accessible and sustainable within schools. Interdisciplinary collaboration between educators, therapists, parents, and policymakers will be key to integrating these approaches effectively.

A future-focused model of special education should not rely solely on standardized academic outcomes but should also nurture creativity, identity, and emotional resilience. By embracing both cognitive and expressive forms of learning, schools can become more inclusive, equitable, and empowering for all learners—particularly those whose needs are often marginalized by conventional educational systems. With commitment and vision, special education can evolve into a truly transformative force in American schooling.

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