# Education & Theatre

## Enhancing the resilience of children and adolescents through drama pedagogy in times of crisis

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**To cite this article:**

# Enhancing the **resilience** of **children** and **adolescents** through **drama pedagogy** in **times of crisis**

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## Abstract

The use of drama pedagogy has emerged as a significant method of supporting the psychosocial resilience of children and adolescents during times of crisis, such as pandemics, social upheaval and natural disasters. A key focus of this approach is addressing the negative impact of such crises on young people's mental health and social development. Typical manifestations include anxiety, depression and social isolation. Using theatre and drama techniques has been shown to be an effective way of enhancing adaptive skills, promoting collectivity and fostering emotional well-being. This paper constitutes a theoretical study based on a narrative review of the international literature published between 2004 and 2024. It highlights the need for a long-term evaluation of theatre/drama-based interventions, as well as the importance of designing applications that are culturally and socially responsive. Drama pedagogy can reinforce psychological resilience and foster young people's social and emotional competencies during times of crisis.

**Keywords:** *Drama pedagogy, applied theatre, resilience, crises, well-being, social support*

## Introduction

Epidemics, natural disasters and other crises arising from social phenomena (such as armed conflicts, global economic downturns, migration flows, terrorist attacks and climate change) affect public health and the mental and social well-being of individuals. Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable during this sensitive stage of development and are often the worst affected by these impacts, which can have serious and long-term consequences for their current and future lives (Lehmann et al., 2022).

Providing psychosocial support for children and adolescents during times of crisis is crucial, as they face numerous challenges, including fear, uncertainty and anxiety. These factors can have an adverse effect on their mental health and social interactions. As demonstrated in related studies, such situations can lead to feelings of insecurity, difficulties in social relationships and can even result in behavioural disorders (Peek, 2008). Psychosocial support is said to play a pivotal role in maintaining their emotional balance and developing strategies to enhance their psychological

resilience (Dray et al., 2015). Well-structured interventions that focus on emotional regulation and creating affective bonds with both peers and adults can significantly improve mental well-being (Solga, 2019).

Drama education and, drama pedagogy more broadly, can serve as powerful tools enabling children and adolescents to express their emotions during crises and discover new perspectives and coping mechanisms in response to disruptions in their daily lives and uncertainty about the future. The playful nature of drama education, involving theatre games, improvisation, storytelling and role play, helps children and adolescents express fear, anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty, establishing an imaginative relationship with reality that has a therapeutic effect on their consciousness (Tam, 2020). Based on a drama pedagogy approach, young people are encouraged to engage with their emotions and view their experiences in a more optimistic and positive light (Solga, 2019). At the same time, values such as cooperation, communication, empathy, solidarity and collective action are promoted, giving children and adolescents the skills they need to deal with challenges and build collaborative relationships (Kladaki & Mastrothanasis, 2022). Indeed, studies have shown that, in times of crisis, people in different countries have turned to the arts, theatre in particular, to maintain a sense of belonging and community (Hirsu et al., 2020; Pigkou-Repousi, 2024).

This paper explores how drama pedagogy can support the management of the psychosocial consequences of epidemics and crises affecting children and adolescents. More specifically, it examines how theatre/drama-based interventions can alleviate psychological distress and foster resilience among young people, and identifies effective methods in this context.

## Methodology

This paper presents a theoretical study based on a narrative review of international literature. The search focused on scholarly publications in English and Greek, published between 2004 and 2024, and was conducted using the databases Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC and Google Scholar.

Combinations of keywords such as "drama education", "applied theatre", "crisis intervention", "psychosocial resilience", "children" and "adolescents" were searched for in both English and Greek, employing logical operators (AND, OR) where appropriate. Studies describing theatre/drama-based interventions in crisis contexts, such as pandemics, natural disasters and social traumas, with the aim of supporting the psychological resilience of children and adolescents were prioritised.

## The psychosocial impact of crises on children and adolescents

Crises are events that have widespread and often long-lasting consequences for people's lives (Pikoulis et al., 2022). While everyone is affected by the hardships that accompany such situations, children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable. Their developmental and age-specific characteristics, coupled with the ongoing process of identity formation, make them more susceptible to the psychosocial repercussions of crises. Such periods can disrupt the psychological stability of children and adolescents and influence their development at critical life stages. Therefore, it is essential to understand the extent and nature of the impact of crises on the mental health and social development of children and adolescents. The negative effects of these experiences are not confined to the immediate aftermath, but can have long-lasting consequences for their well-being and ability to cope with future adversity.

Psychologically, the effects of crises can be especially profound and long-lasting, affecting people of all ages. However, children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable as they are still developing cognitively and emotionally, and are navigating crucial phases in the formation of identity, personality and emotional maturity. The experiences they have during these phases can have deep and lasting implications for their mental health and their ability to handle future stress and anxiety (Levine, 2003).

Children and adolescents often experience a range of adverse psychological effects in the context of public health emergencies such as pandemics and epidemics. These can include anxiety, sleep disturbances, behavioural changes and depression. Such symptoms are often linked to feelings of fear and uncertainty about the future, as well as isolation resulting from disconnection from their social and educational environments. Furthermore, their emotional stability and self-esteem are often disrupted, making them more vulnerable to long-term psychological challenges (Racine et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant rise in psychological issues was observed among children and adolescents, who were subjected to prolonged stress due to social isolation, school closures and widespread uncertainty. This has been shown to lead to long-term psychological consequences, including anxiety disorders, depression, and in some cases, heightened aggression. In their study, Loades et al. (2020) concluded that the social exclusion and disruption to school routines experienced by young people during the pandemic had a considerable impact on elevated levels of anxiety and depression. Similarly, research by Jiao et al. (2020)

found that children in lockdown exhibited increased stress, sleep disturbances and loss of appetite.

Furthermore, during crises, children and adolescents often struggle to maintain connections with their peers, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and depression. These difficulties are largely due to movement restrictions and the absence of a physical school presence, both of which severely limit social interactions and negatively affect their social development. A UNICEF (2020) report highlighted that school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic had an adverse impact on the development of children and adolescents' social skills, primarily due to a lack of interaction with peers.

In addition, crises can significantly disrupt family structures, particularly for children and adolescents. This often leads to financial difficulties and breakdowns in communication, which further undermines their overall well-being. Also, the social inequalities persist and disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups, with a direct impact on children and adolescents. This can manifest as limited access to technological resources, which are essential for remote learning, increased social isolation and greater psychological strain.

It is crucial to understand the impact of these experiences, as this forms the basis for developing preventive and supportive strategies that enable children and young people to cope effectively with crises and build psychological resilience. Psychosocial resilience is a key factor in addressing and managing the psychological and social consequences that children and adolescents face during periods of crisis. Challenges such as social isolation, disruption to school routines and uncertainty about the future, as highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the urgent need to strengthen this capacity.

Psychosocial resilience is the ability of an individual or group to adapt to adversity, overcome challenges and recover from them (Levine, 2003). One of the most widely acknowledged theoretical frameworks is that of Ann Masten (2001), who conceptualised resilience as "ordinary magic" arising from the normal functioning of core support systems such as family, school and community. According to Masten, resilience is not an extraordinary trait, but rather a natural human capacity that can be reinforced through appropriate support mechanisms. Other theorists, such as Luthar et al. (2000), have emphasised the importance of protective factors that counterbalance adverse conditions and foster positive development. A more recent perspective is that of "ecological resilience" (Ungar, 2011), which highlights the influence of sociocultural context and

available resources on an individual's ability to adapt. It is clear, therefore, that psychosocial resilience is a multifaceted process influenced by various factors, including the family environment and the level of social support available to the individual. Research has shown that children and adolescents who are surrounded by a supportive network of family members, peers and educators are more likely to develop resilience in times of crisis (Prime et al., 2020).

A safe and supportive environment encourages children and adolescents to express their feelings and thoughts freely. It also equips them with essential coping strategies for managing the challenges they encounter. Such an environment empowers young people, strengthening their self-confidence and helping them recognise their own capacity to overcome adversity (Solga, 2019).

Moreover, strategies such as developing social skills and teaching problem-solving techniques are fundamental to enhancing mental resilience. Targeted educational programmes aimed at strengthening resilience provide children and adolescents with the necessary tools to navigate crisis situations (Touloupis & Athanasiadou, 2024). These programmes promote self-confidence and adaptability, better preparing young people to meet the growing demands of contemporary society.

## The drama pedagogy approach to managing the impact of crises

The effectiveness of drama pedagogy in crisis management is rooted in theoretical perspectives that emphasise the therapeutic and empowering potential of art, particularly drama and theatre. As Boal (1993) argues, theatre can serve as a space for social and psychological liberation, enabling individuals to process experiences of oppression and trauma through performative action. Similarly, Dorothy Heathcote's pedagogical method, known as the "Mantle of the Expert", promotes children's active engagement in imagined scenarios, enhancing their sense of responsibility, self-esteem and decision-making ability in situations requiring adaptability and collaboration (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Papadopoulos, 2010; Papadopoulos & Kosmas, 2020). The connection between theatre and resilience is also supported by Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, as dramatic activity encourages imitation, observation and active participation – elements recognised as essential for developing psychosocial skills.

Drama pedagogy integrates the art of theatre with educational practices, moving beyond the confines of semiotic performance analysis or literary interpretation. The aim is to cultivate aesthetic

experiences and emotional engagement for all participants – facilitators and group members alike – by enacting a creative event (Katsaridou, 2014; Lenakakis, 2008). Drama pedagogy and applied theatre are acknowledged as effective tools for addressing the psychosocial effects of crises (Giotaki & Lenakakis, 2016). Especially during pandemics, epidemics and other crisis situations, drama pedagogy provides children and adolescents with the opportunity to express their emotions, make sense of their experiences and confront the psychological difficulties that affect their development. It also helps them build coping mechanisms and resilience (Mastrothanasis & Kladaki, 2024).

This approach enables children and young people to express their emotions and share their experiences during difficult times, which is an essential process for their mental health. Through applied theatre techniques, they can participate in activities that enhance their decision-making and collaboration skills while engaging in an educational experience that fosters self-expression, critical thinking and social interaction (Asimidou et al., 2021; Mastrothanasis et al., 2023; Mastrothanasis & Kladaki, 2025). As previously discussed, crises can make young people feel isolated and unable to manage their emotions. Drama pedagogy and applied theatre offer supportive environments in which young people can share their experiences and explore their emotional worlds creatively (Pigkou-Repousi, 2024).

Specifically, the process of theatre games enables children and adolescents to externalise their emotions and thoughts, thereby releasing internal tension and anxiety experienced during crises in a safe and supportive environment (Vasiou et al., 2024). Furthermore, through dramatisation and improvisation, they can act out situations that concern them, which helps them understand and process their emotions. Techniques such as story dramatisation and readers' theatre serve as pedagogical tools in crisis response contexts. They enrich children and adolescents' understanding of the causes of disasters and their consequences, while fostering empathy, an essential capacity for responding to the needs of others in distress (Mastrothanasis & Kladaki, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies showed that participants experienced emotional, psychological and social empowerment when puppetry and puppet animation were successfully integrated into remote education (Vitsou & Dimou, 2023).

Presenting educational programmes that applied drama pedagogy as an intervention strategy during crises demonstrates its vital role. One such example is the "Happy4Rs" programme, which was implemented in Hong Kong following the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme aimed to support students and educators as they returned to school. Drama techniques were employed to bolster psychological resilience, enabling participants to articulate their anxieties and fears through performance. The programme made a significant contribution to the emotional recovery of both children and educators, fostering cooperation and emotional understanding (Tam, 2020).

Another relevant initiative was the "Creative Recovery" programme in Australia, which used theatre to address the mental health challenges experienced by children and adolescents during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Through dramatic storytelling, improvisation, role-play and theatre games, participants explored the emotions caused by social isolation, thus enhancing their emotional well-being and psychological resilience (https://creativerecovery.net.au/).

As previously noted, the use of applied puppetry further illustrates the positive impact of drama pedagogy in crisis contexts. During the period of the lockdown imposed due to the pandemic, remote puppetry-based programmes were developed in schools across Ohio, Zimbabwe and New York. These programmes aimed to provide emotional support and strengthen resilience among students and educators. Similarly, the "COVID Puppets – The Show Must Go On" workshops at Pelangi schools in Indonesia encouraged children to express their feelings about the pandemic by creating puppets from recycled materials. The influence of the Sesame Street initiative was also deemed highly significant, given that it produced specialised educational material on pandemic-related topics such as handwashing and mask-wearing (Vitsou & Dimou, 2023).

All of the aforementioned case studies confirm that drama pedagogy can offer powerful tools for improving the psychosocial resilience of children and adolescents during times of crisis (Barnes & Coetzee, 2014). Such activities provide young people with the opportunity to process feelings of isolation and anxiety, boost their self-confidence and develop problem-solving skills. At the same time, the collective nature of these interventions fosters a sense of community, providing meaningful support to young participants during periods of adversity and helping them build resilience.

## Narrative review of emergency drama-based interventions

Drama pedagogy is widely recognised as an effective educational practice in emergency response interventions, providing a creative way to support

children and adolescents who have experienced trauma. It can be applied in a variety of settings, such as schools, community programmes and mental health centres, to enable emotional expression and the processing of experiences, thereby promoting psychological well-being.

Chang's (2005) study emphasised the therapeutic potential of theatre in alleviating the psychological distress suffered by students in the aftermath of the catastrophic 1999 earthquake in Taiwan, which caused thousands of casualties and injuries. Research has shown that theatre workshops organised in schools provided children with a space to express their trauma, process their emotions and begin the process of psychological recovery. Integrating psychodrama techniques with Gestalt therapy, a psychotherapeutic approach focusing on the individual's present experience, created a safe framework within which children could enhance their resilience and regain essential communication skills (Mastrothanasis et al., 2025). These workshops not only fostered cooperation and facilitated therapeutic reintegration into the community, but also, in line with the observations of Woodland et al. (2023), underscored the potential of drama pedagogy to address issues such as "eco-anxiety". This approach reinforces community resilience and collective recovery following disasters.

In a related study, Hirsu et al. (2020) examined cultural intervention programmes using children's literature and artistic practices for populations affected by the 2017 earthquake in Mexico. They found that such interventions can provide substantial emotional relief and a sense of security to those affected when implemented in post-disaster recovery contexts. The intervention used illustrated books, dramatised storytelling and theatre games as core tools to strengthen positive emotions and encourage active problem-solving among participants. The educational content focused on interpreting natural phenomena and connecting them to children's everyday experiences. Sharing personal narratives within the group simultaneously reinforced social cohesion and solidarity, significantly reducing anxiety and feelings of alienation.

In this context, the study by Giotaki and Lenakakis (2016) highlights the potential of theatre as an educational tool for helping preschool-aged children to explore and make sense of complex concepts during times of socioeconomic crisis. The researchers investigated how young children perceive economic hardship and their capacity to express and regulate emotions while developing empathy through a theatre pedagogy intervention implemented in a kindergarten classroom. Techniques such as

Theatre of the Oppressed, dramatised storytelling, improvisation and role play enabled the children to embody everyday experiences related to crises such as unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, and to propose alternative coping strategies and ways of showing solidarity. The results showed a significant improvement in the children's understanding of social issues, as well as an increase in empathy and participation in diversity activities. This study demonstrates that theatre can provide a space for dialogue, empowerment and reinterpreting reality, even at preschool level.

More recently, a study by Bubeck et al. (2024) examined the role of community theatre in facilitating trauma recovery following coastal disasters, as well as its potential as a means of communicating risk in disaster mitigation efforts. More specifically, the researchers evaluated community theatre interventions implemented in coastal regions of Vietnam. Through performances targeting children and women in these communities, theatre was found to enhance psychological recovery, risk perception, flood awareness, self-efficacy and the importance of civic engagement. Furthermore, the study documented a positive influence on participants' willingness to engage in collective risk reduction initiatives, alongside indications of long-term behavioural change.

Barnes and Coetzee (2014) examined the potential of theatre as a form of social intervention in conflict and post-conflict situations. Focusing on regions affected by war, the authors analysed how theatre can promote healing from trauma, empower individuals and communities, and foster resilience, particularly among vulnerable groups such as refugees, survivors of conflict and children.

Tam (2020) describes an applied drama education project conducted in schools in Hong Kong, aimed at empowering children and teachers and supporting their recovery after the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. The project featured workshops using dramatised storytelling, theatre games and improvisation to help participants adapt to changes induced by the crisis. Preliminary findings suggested that the approach was beneficial, enhancing the psychological resilience children and educators alike in the aftermath of the pandemic. By offering meaningful support and contributing to their personal well-being, it demonstrated its relevance and applicability in future crises.

Moreover, the multimodal use of puppetry has been adopted internationally and in Greece. In November 2020, a programme involving first and second grade pupils was conducted at a primary school in the city of Volos. During the programme, the facilitator presented short puppet stories that

addressed pandemic-related emotions such as sadness, nervousness and loneliness. The children then made their own puppets from various materials and brought them to life in group sessions. Each session concluded with a reflective discussion, enabling the children to express and share their emotions with their peers. Research findings showed that creating and animating puppets fostered a positive and optimistic outlook on the future among both the children and the facilitators (Vitsou & Dimou, 2023). This supports the argument that puppetry can serve as an immediate and effective tool for crisis management (Papouli, 2025).

## Conclusion

This study examined the role of drama pedagogy as an effective tool for managing crises among children and adolescents, particularly in the context of pandemics, epidemics, natural disasters and social crises. A review of the relevant literature revealed that diverse theatre/drama techniques, such as dramatised storytelling, theatre games, improvisation and puppetry can foster psychological resilience in children and adolescents, particularly in educational and community settings.

Various theatre/drama-based projects implemented in the aftermath of severe crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters, were analysed to highlight drama and theatre's ability to encourage emotional expression, collaboration and a sense of community. Such interventions support children and adolescents in confronting traumatic experiences, managing their emotional responses and developing resilience skills to help them navigate critical situations and overcome the psychological and social repercussions of such events.

Drama pedagogy and applied theatre provide safe, supportive spaces in which children and adolescents can express thoughts, fears and concerns that they might otherwise be unable to articulate (Arampatzidou et al., 2015; Mastrothanasis et al., 2024). They cultivate empathy, cooperation and emotional understanding through theatrical and dramatic practices, which are vital skills for effective crisis management. Furthermore, these interventions have been shown to boost self-confidence, creativity and the ability to solve problems strategically (Mastrothanasis et al., 2018; Papakosta et al., 2020).

Drama pedagogy thus affirms the educational function of drama/theatre, which not only offers psychological support but also provides opportunities for learning and personal development. Interventions in different contexts show that it can be used as an immediate response to crisis situations and as a way of strengthening the psychological resilience

of children and young people (Sextou, 2022; Sextou et al., 2020).

## Suggestions for future research

There is a clear need for further investigation into the long-term effectiveness of drama pedagogy interventions. Future research in this field should focus on evaluating the sustainability of such programmes, particularly in terms of their ability to foster psychological resilience in children and adolescents over time.

In addition, exploring potential differences based on demographic variables such as gender, age, cultural identity and socioeconomic background would be valuable in designing differentiated interventions tailored to the specific needs of diverse groups. Designing and implementing theatre/drama-based programmes in different cultural contexts could deepen our understanding of theatre's role as a method for crisis management. Examples include initiatives targeting refugee populations (Pikoulis et al., 2024; Puchner et al., 2018) or communities in conflict zones.

Finally, it is strongly recommended that educational programmes incorporating drama pedagogy should be developed as part of preparedness strategies for the psychosocial management of future crises. Such interventions may serve a preventive function by strengthening the resilience of children and adolescents before a critical situation arises (Touloupis et al., 2024). An interdisciplinary approach combining drama pedagogy techniques with other forms of artistic expression, such as music, visual arts or creative writing, within the educational process is of particular interest for future research. This could contribute to the creation of a multimodal model aimed at empowering the emotional and social development of students.

## Limitations of the study

This study is a narrative review, which is a methodological choice that limits the generalisability of its conclusions due to the absence of strict criteria for systematic search and evaluation. Additionally, the chronological scope of the included studies is somewhat narrow, as most of the interventions relate to the period following the COVID-19 pandemic, which may affect the diversity of case examples.

Furthermore, there is a limited number of empirical studies assessing the effectiveness of such interventions, and data concerning long-term outcomes is often lacking. It is also important to acknowledge that not all populations benefit equally from drama pedagogy practices. Some children or adolescents may prefer less expressive or less group-oriented

forms of engagement, suggesting a need for differentiated methodological approaches that are tailored to the individual needs and preferences of participants.

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