

Using Dramatherapy to Prevent Student Burnout: Insights and Practical Approaches

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Abstract: Student burnout has become increasingly common in the contemporary academic environment, fueled by performance pressures, overexertion, academic anxiety, and limited strategies for emotional self-regulation. In this context, dramatherapy emerges as an innovative pedagogical method, capable of offering students a safe space for exploring emotions, developing resilience and strengthening professional identity. The article analyzes the theoretical foundations of dramatherapy, its action mechanisms in preventing burnout, and the concrete ways in which it can be integrated into university programs. Examples of dramatic exercises, intervention models and benefits observed among students are presented. The study proposes an interdisciplinary approach, situating dramatherapy at the intersection of pedagogy, psychology and the performing arts, and argues for the need to include it in modern academic training.

Keywords: burnout, dramatherapy, theatre pedagogy, emotion, student, acting

1. Introduction

In recent years, student burnout has become a central concern in higher education, particularly in vocational fields where emotional involvement, performance pressure, and constant evaluation are integral to the learning process. Acting, as both an artistic and pedagogical subject, requires intense engagement of psychological, physical, and relational resources. This makes students especially vulnerable to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and a loss of professional meaning. In this context, it becomes essential to identify pedagogical approaches that not only develop artistic skills but also support students' emotional well-being. Dramatherapy—situated at the intersection of art, psychology, and education—offers a unique framework for exploring emotions, managing tension, and strengthening professional identity. As Landy (1993) suggests, *“The roles we play are not only*

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*expressions of the self, but also ways in which we construct our identity*¹. Through role-play, fiction, and symbolic action, students can transform difficult experiences into expressive resources; in addition, they can externalize internal conflicts, and develop emotional self-regulation mechanisms.

This article explores how dramatherapy can function as a tool for preventing burnout among acting students, based on a case study conducted with a final-year group. It examines complex group dynamics, tensions caused by unequal role distribution, individual differences in coping with stress, and the impact of dramatic interventions on both learning and interpersonal relationships. As Jones P. notes in *Drama as Therapy: Theory, Practice and Research*, “Through role, the individual can explore alternative versions of the self in a space safe enough to allow transformation”².

By combining theoretical perspectives with the analysis of concrete experiences, this paper highlights the potential of dramatherapy to turn difficulties into opportunities for growth, rebuild professional meaning, and create a psychologically safe space in which students can develop both artistically and personally.

2. Theoretical framework: burnout and dramatherapy

2.1. Understanding student burnout

Emotional exhaustion is the core component of burnout, defined as “*a feeling of being emotionally drained*”³. Burnout is a state of emotional, cognitive, and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged exposure to stress and excessive demands. In the academic environment, burnout typically manifests in three main dimensions: emotional exhaustion – feeling of inner emptiness, chronic fatigue, lack of energy; cynicism or detachment – emotional distancing from studies, loss of interest,

¹ R.J Landy, *Persona and Performance: The Meaning of Role in Drama, Therapy, and Everyday Life*, New York, Guilford Press, 1993, p.27

² P. Jones, *Drama as Therapy: Theory, Practice and Research*, London, Routledge, 1996, p.112

³ C. Maslach, S. E. Jackson, and M. P. Leiter, *Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual*, Consulting Psychologists Press, Palo Alto, 1996, p.20

irritability; decreased personal efficacy – perception that efforts do not lead to results, doubt in one's own abilities.

In acting, these symptoms are intensified by the nature of the training: constant evaluation, exposure to intense emotions, performance pressure, internal competition, and the vulnerability inherent in artistic processes. Burnout develops gradually, often due to overload, lack of emotional support, and insufficient self-regulation strategies. As research suggests, “*Burnout is the result of chronic emotional stress that exceeds the individual’s ability to recover*”⁴. If not addressed, it can lead to dropout, interpersonal conflicts, decreased artistic performance, and declining mental health.

2.2. Dramatherapy: definitions, principles and pedagogical relevance

Dramatherapy is a form of expressive intervention that uses dramatic techniques—role-play, improvisation, fiction, and symbolic action—to facilitate emotional exploration, transform inner conflicts, and develop personal resources. Inspired by J. L. Moreno’s psychodrama, Augusto Boal’s forum theatre, and contemporary play theories, dramatherapy is built on several key principles:

Aesthetic distance. This allows students to approach intense emotions through a character or a fictional situation. Instead of confronting their vulnerabilities directly, students can explore them within a symbolic and protected space.

Externalization. This involves transforming an internal problem into a role, object, or dramatic action. Emotions become visible, tangible, and open to discussion. In this way, students can “see” what they feel, which helps reduce emotional intensity.

Catharsis. This refers to the release of emotional tension through artistic expression. In acting, catharsis is not only therapeutic but also pedagogical: it helps clarify internal blockages, restores energy, and opens access to authentic stage presence.

Co-creation. The dramatic process is fundamentally collaborative. Within a group, students find support, reflection, and validation. In the context of burnout, this sense of group cohesion serves as a crucial protective factor, helping students feel connected and understood.

⁴ W.B. Schaufeli, and D. Enzmann, *The Burnout Companion to Study and Practice*, London, CRC Press, 1998, p.36

Identity reconstruction. Through roles, scripts, and improvisations, students can experience alternative versions of the self. The construction of the student-actor's professional identity is often achieved through the exploration of roles, because “*the roles we play are not only expressions of the self, but also ways in which we construct our identity*”⁵. Dramatherapy thus becomes a space for renegotiating professional and personal identity.

2.3. Connecting dramatherapy to burnout prevention

Dramatherapy is particularly effective in preventing burnout because it creates a safe space for expressing emotions that might otherwise be suppressed. It channels tension into creative expression, reduces feelings of isolation through group activities, and develops empathy and communication skills. It also fosters self-reflection, heightens awareness of personal limits, restores meaning and professional motivation, and reframes vulnerability as a strength rather than a weakness. Vocational fields such as acting are especially prone to burnout because they “*involve deep and ongoing emotional investment*”⁶. For emerging professionals, the pressure of developing their identity alongside artistic demands creates fertile ground for burnout.

Theatre, at its core, is a process of inner transformation. As Grotowski observed, “*the actor must reveal himself, must offer himself as a gift*”⁷. Stage authenticity depends on inner sincerity. Stanislavski emphasized that “*you must truly live within the given circumstances*”⁸, and this experience becomes the foundation of scenic truth.

Dramatherapy is therefore not only a therapeutic technique but also a pedagogical method that supports the artistic process, emotional well-being, and professional development. Its integration into actor training cannot be fully

⁵ Robert J. Landy, *Persona and Performance: The Meaning of Role in Drama, Therapy, and Everyday Life*, New York, Guilford Press, 1993, p.27

⁶ A. M. Pines and E. Aronson, *Career Burnout: Causes and Cures*, New York, Free Press, 1988, p.12

⁷ J. Grotowski, *Spre un teatru sărac [Towards a Poor Theatre]*, București, Editura Unitext, 1998, p.37

⁸ K.S. Stanislavski, *Munca actorului cu sine însuși [An Actor's Work on the Self]*, București, Editura Nemira, 2014, p.28

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understood through theory and conceptual models alone, because theatre becomes transformative only when the actors allow themselves to be affected by the process, not merely to execute it, as Brook (1968) suggests. Although the literature provides a solid framework for understanding mechanisms such as externalization, aesthetic distance, catharsis, and co-creation, the true pedagogical value of these processes becomes visible only in direct contact with the lived reality of student groups.

In the university environment, each group functions as a micro-emotional ecosystem, where relational dynamics, academic pressures, emerging professional identities, and personal vulnerabilities intertwine in unique ways. This is why the analysis of a case study becomes essential in understanding how dramatherapy can prevent burnout, transform tension into expression resources, and support artistic maturation. The case study presented below explores precisely this applied dimension: how a small group of final-year students, facing academic pressure, structural imbalances, and emotional challenges, integrated dramatherapy techniques into their working process. The analysis examines both individual and collective dynamics, highlighting how dramatic interventions influenced relationships, emotional self-regulation, and the students' artistic development.

3. Case Study/ Practical Observations: Dramatherapy as a Tool for Preventing Burnout in a Group of Final-Year Students

3.1 Group settings

The case study focuses on a group of five students in their fourth year of a bachelor's program, specializing in Performing Arts – Acting. In small groups like this, collective dynamics become a crucial factor. Moreno emphasized that *“the group is more than the sum of its individuals; it is a living organism that can heal or harm”*⁹. In dramatherapy, this “organism” becomes a so-called *“emotional container”* (Sue Jennings, 1998), where tensions can be expressed and transformed.

Initially, seven students were admitted: six women and one man. Over time, three female students dropped out, and a transfer student joined in the second year. The current composition—four female students and a single male student—created a structural imbalance that significantly affected group dynamics and the distribution of

⁹ J.L. Moreno, *Who Shall Survive? Foundations of Siciometry, Group Psychotherapy and Sociodrama*, (N.Y.), Beacon House, Beacon 1953, p.56

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performance opportunities. The presence of only one male student limited the female students' ability to work in varied scenes, forcing them to share the same partner in most projects. This situation generated frustration, a sense of stagnation, and the perception of unintentional inequity. Meanwhile, the male student found himself in a difficult position: he participated in more rehearsals but had less recovery time, without being responsible for the structural imbalance.

3.2 Pedagogical problem and moment of crisis

Experiential learning is central to actor education. As Kolb notes, "*learning is the process by which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience*"¹⁰, a principle that aligns seamlessly with the hands-on nature of acting.

Although the group initially appeared cohesive following a theatre-dance project showcased at student festivals, the start of the fourth year brought an emotional outburst from the female students, who expressed their need for more consistent scores and equal opportunities for affirmation. This crisis brought to the surface tensions accumulated over time and highlighted the group's vulnerability to academic pressures, repertoire limitations, and emotional exhaustion. To address these concerns, *Snake in the Grass* by Alan Ayckbourn was chosen, featuring three female roles. To include the male student in the final-year project, the nurse role was adapted for a male performer, and female roles were doubled. Paradoxically, this adjustment heightened the female students' frustration, as the male student ended up participating in both casts, increasing rehearsal demands.

3.3 Male student dynamics: between ambition, vulnerability, and creative tension

The male student learned the text first, benefiting from additional reading and being motivated by the desire to prove that he deserved his place in a predominantly female group. However, when it came to the *mise-en-scène*, he had difficulty adapting: disorientation, blockages, impatience. These responses are common in actor training, reflecting the difference between "the learned text" and "the lived text". The addition of props, movement, and scene partners radically transforms the student's

¹⁰ D. A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1984, p.38

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relationship with the dramatic material. Pedagogical intervention focused on channeling tensions into character development. Raw emotions—frustration, helplessness, anger—were incorporated into the dramatic process, turning potential obstacles into expressive tools. The character’s mask acted as a protective filter, relieving emotional pressure while enabling moments of authentic stage presence.

Two female students, two ways to survive burnout.

3.4. Female student A: resilience, self-regulation, and artistic maturity

Female student A, who has also completed degrees in physiotherapy and medicine and is now a resident in family medicine, exemplifies resilience and self-regulation, despite an intense schedule. She employs dramatherapy techniques as personal tools: expressing emotions through roles, exploring vulnerabilities in symbolic spaces, and reconstructing her professional identity through dramatic dialogue. Even when fatigued, she remains engaged, connected, and receptive. Her on-stage interactions with the male student are marked by a unique chemistry that fosters authenticity. Even when she voices dissatisfaction with role allocation, she consistently transforms tension into creative energy during performances.

3.5 Female student B: inner conflict, scenic formalism, and identity crisis

Female student B, pursuing a second degree, represents a complex case at the intersection of burnout, inner conflict, and delayed teenage development. Coming from a family of law professionals, she initially pursued law, likely due to conformism and familial expectations. Choosing acting appears to be an act of rebellion rather than a clear vocational calling. This ambivalence is reflected in her acting, which is currently formalist and rigid, lacking deep emotional involvement, and often imitating the teacher’s instructions rather than engaging authentically. In his book, *To the Actor*, Michael Chekhov reminds us that “*the actor must seek not to imitate life, but its essence*”¹¹.

Female student B seems to lack a clear purpose, making her divergent, conflictual, and often oppositional toward classmates and teachers. She is experiencing emotional burnout combined with an identity crisis, manifested through

¹¹M. Chekhov, *Către actor [To the Actor]*, București, Editura Nemira, 2017, p.19

accumulated anger, frequent outbursts, difficulty in managing frustration, opposition to authority, and tension with the male student, whom she dislikes. She constantly doubts instructions or suggestions from class.

From a dramatherapy perspective, female student B has not yet been able to transform raw emotion into symbolic action. She remains “*outside the role*,” unable to use fiction as a protective and exploratory space. Emotional self-regulation is essential in preventing burnout. Goleman underlines that it represents “*the ability to manage impulses and emotions without being overwhelmed*”¹². This stage is not a pedagogical failure but a natural phase in artistic and personal maturation. Dramatherapy can become a tool for reconnecting with herself, though this process requires time, psychological safety, and inner willingness.

4. General Interpretation: The Group as a Collective Organism

The group functions as a living organism in which each member influences the overall dynamic. The tension of one group member can become the tension of all; likewise, the stability of one group member can stabilize the collective rhythm. Internal processes—communication, pacing, boundaries—act like a shared metabolism. When burnout occurs, it is not merely an individual problem but a symptom of a system that can no longer regulate its resources effectively. Healing, therefore, becomes a collective process, where the entire system reorganizes to support each part. Gender imbalance, academic overload, professional identities in formation, and interpersonal tensions create fertile ground both for burnout and for transformation. Dramatherapy provides a framework in which tensions can be externalized, conflicts can be explored symbolically, relationships can be reconfigured, and professional identities can be reconstructed.

5. Conclusions

This case study demonstrates that dramatherapy is a valuable pedagogical tool for preventing student burnout, particularly in small groups under the pressure of final-year exams and professional transition. Through mechanisms such as externalization, aesthetic distancing, catharsis, and co-creation, students develop

¹² D. Goleman, *Inteligența emoțională [Emotional Intelligence]*, București, Editura Curtea Veche, 2008, p.34

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emotional self-regulation, clarify their artistic identity, and strengthen group relationships.

At the same time, the study shows that the process is not linear: some students quickly integrate dramatherapy tools, while others remain in a phase of inner conflict. Both stages are legitimate and necessary. Dramatherapy does not eliminate stress but transforms it into expression, meaning, and growth. It does not standardize reactions but provides a space for their manifestation. It does not promise calm, but authenticity. And authenticity, ultimately, is the essence of actor training.

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