GYANBODH
An International Multidisciplinary Peer Reviewed Journal
ISSN:3048-9792
Volume: 3
Issue: 2
March - April: 2026

Drama as Pedagogy: A Theoretical Perspective on Its Role in Enhancing Academic Achievement in Languages and Social Science at the Upper Primary Stage

Research Scholar -Parmar Madhvi Harishbhai
Faculty of Education
Swaminarayan University,Kalol
Guide- Dr. Ranchodbhai K. Prajapati
Faculty of Education
Swaminarayan University,Kalol

Abstract

Educational drama has long been advocated as a child-centred pedagogy, yet its theoretical justification for academic achievement in school subjects is seldom articulated in a single, coherent framework. This paper examines the conceptual and theoretical foundations that explain how educational drama can raise academic achievement in Gujarati language education, English language education and social science education among Gujarati-medium students of the upper primary stage (Standards 6 to 8). Drawing on constructivism, sociocultural theory, experiential learning, social learning theory, multiple intelligences and second-language acquisition theory, the paper develops a conceptual model in which drama operates through four mediating processes: embodied meaning-making, social interaction, emotional engagement and reflective thinking. The paper further discusses the developmental suitability of drama for early adolescents, its alignment with the National Education Policy 2020, and the practical challenges of implementation in Gujarati-medium schools. It concludes with implications for teachers, curriculum designers and researchers, and proposes directions for empirical testing of the model.

Keywords: educational drama, academic achievement, upper primary education, Gujarati language, English language, social science, constructivism, sociocultural theory

1. Introduction

Academic achievement at the upper primary stage is shaped by far more than the transmission of content. Students in Standards 6 to 8 are moving from concrete to more abstract thinking, and the subjects they meet become more demanding in vocabulary, conceptual load and expectation of

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independent reasoning. In Gujarati-medium schools, three subjects carry particular weight in this transition: Gujarati, which is the medium of instruction and the vehicle of all other learning; English, which is usually a second or additional language and a gateway to higher education and employment; and social science, which asks students to understand history, geography, civics and economics through dense, text-based material. Teaching in these areas is still frequently dominated by lecture, textbook reading and rote memorisation, approaches that often yield short-term recall but limited understanding, weak retention and low motivation.

Educational drama offers an alternative. In this approach drama is not a performance for an audience but a method of learning in which students take on roles, enter imagined situations, improvise, discuss and reflect, guided by a teacher who structures the experience toward curricular goals (Bolton, 1984; Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). The central claim of the pedagogy is that learners understand ideas more deeply when they live through them, rather than merely hear about them. Although a considerable body of practice literature supports this claim, the question of why and how drama should improve measurable academic achievement requires theoretical explanation. Without such explanation, empirical studies risk treating drama as a black box whose effects are observed but not understood.

This paper therefore adopts a theoretical perspective. Its purpose is to identify and integrate the major learning theories that explain the relationship between educational drama and academic achievement, to apply them specifically to Gujarati, English and social science education at the upper primary stage, and to propose a conceptual model that can guide future empirical research. The paper is organised as follows: it first clarifies the key concepts, then reviews the theoretical foundations, then applies these foundations to each of the three subject areas, and finally discusses developmental, policy and practical considerations.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Educational Drama

The terms drama in education, creative drama, process drama and educational drama are used with overlapping meanings. Their common feature is a focus on the participants' experience rather than on a finished theatrical product (Way, 1967; Slade, 1954). In educational drama, students may

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ISSN:3048-9792
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enact a historical event, interview a character from a story, improvise a market scene to practise English dialogue, or hold a mock panchayat to debate a civic issue. The teacher often works in role, posing questions and introducing tensions that push thinking forward. Drama so conceived is a way of teaching, not a separate subject, and it can be embedded in any curricular area.

Four characteristics define the method. First, it is experiential: learning arises from doing and living through situations. Second, it is social: meaning is built collectively through negotiation among participants. Third, it is imaginative: students work within a fictional frame that is safe yet emotionally real. Fourth, it is reflective: the enacted experience is discussed and analysed, which converts experience into understanding.

2.2 Academic Achievement

Academic achievement is generally understood as the level of attainment a student demonstrates in school subjects, usually measured through teacher-made or standardised tests. In a theoretical discussion, however, achievement should not be reduced to recall of facts. The revised taxonomy of educational objectives distinguishes remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Drama is theoretically most promising for the higher levels of this hierarchy, but a well-designed achievement test can also capture its effects on comprehension and application. This distinction matters because the benefits of drama may be understated if achievement is measured only through items that reward memorisation.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1 Constructivism

Constructivist theories hold that learners actively build knowledge rather than passively receive it. Dewey (1938) argued that education must be grounded in experience and that genuine learning occurs when students encounter problems that matter to them and work through them. Piaget (1962) emphasised that symbolic play is the means by which children assimilate the world to existing mental structures, and that representation through role and make-believe supports the growth of abstract thought. Bruner (1966) proposed that knowledge can be represented enactively, iconically and symbolically, and that good teaching moves learners through these modes. Drama

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fits this progression naturally: students first enact a concept with their bodies, then picture it through scenes and images, and finally express it in words and written text.

For upper primary students, who are still consolidating concrete operational thinking while beginning to reason abstractly, this scaffolding from enactment to symbol is especially valuable. A student who has physically experienced the roles of a farmer, a moneylender and a tax collector in a dramatised scene is better equipped to understand an abstract textbook passage on rural economy than one who has only read the passage.

3.2 Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky (1978) argued that higher mental functions originate in social interaction and are internalised through language and other cultural tools. Two ideas are central here. The first is the zone of proximal development, the gap between what a learner can do alone and what can be achieved with guidance or collaboration. In drama, the teacher in role, the peer group and the dramatic frame all act as scaffolds that enable students to attempt thinking beyond their independent level. The second idea concerns play. Vygotsky (1967) observed that in imaginative play a child behaves beyond his average age and above his daily behaviour, as though he were a head taller than himself. Role-taking in drama extends this principle to older children, allowing them to speak, reason and argue with greater sophistication than in ordinary classroom exchanges. Sociocultural theory is particularly relevant to language learning, because language develops through use in meaningful social situations. Drama creates such situations in the classroom, replacing isolated sentence drills with purposeful dialogue.

3.3 Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb (1984) described learning as a cycle comprising concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Educational drama mirrors this cycle closely. Students undergo a concrete experience through enactment, reflect on it in discussion, form concepts and generalisations, and then test them in a further round of improvisation. Because every phase of the cycle is accommodated, the method supports diverse learners rather than favouring only those who learn well from reading and listening.

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3.4 Social Learning Theory

Bandura (1977) proposed that people learn by observing models, and that learning is influenced by attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. Through drama students observe peers and the teacher modelling language, reasoning and social behaviour, and they rehearse these behaviours in a low-risk setting. Bandura's concept of self-efficacy is also relevant. Successful participation in dramatic tasks can strengthen students' belief in their own capability, which in turn is associated with greater effort and persistence in academic work. For shy or low-achieving students, the protective distance of role, since the character and not the child is speaking, can lower anxiety and encourage participation.

3.5 Multiple Intelligences

Gardner (1983) proposed that human beings possess several relatively independent intelligences, including linguistic, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, spatial and musical. Traditional classrooms privilege linguistic and logical intelligences. Drama draws simultaneously on many of them: students speak and listen, move, cooperate, imagine spatial arrangements, and reflect on their own feelings. By offering multiple entry points to the same content, drama increases the likelihood that each student will find a route to understanding, which is a plausible mechanism for improved achievement across a heterogeneous class.

3.6 Language Acquisition Theory

For Gujarati and English education, theories of language acquisition provide additional support. Krashen (1982) argued that acquisition requires comprehensible input in a low-anxiety environment, which he described as a low affective filter. Swain (1985) added that learners also need opportunities for pushed output, in which they must produce language and in doing so notice gaps in their knowledge. Drama supplies both: the dramatic context makes input comprehensible through gesture, setting and situation, and the demand to speak in role pushes students to produce language meaningfully. The fictional frame also reduces the fear of error that so often silences learners in a second language.

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4. Application to Gujarati Language Education

Gujarati is the first language of most students in Gujarati-medium schools, yet achievement in the subject depends on more than everyday fluency. Upper primary students are expected to appreciate literary prose and poetry, master grammar, write coherent compositions and comprehend increasingly abstract texts. Drama supports each of these aims.

When students dramatise a prose lesson or a folk tale, they must interpret character motive, tone and sequence, which deepens comprehension. Improvised dialogue encourages the use of idiom, register and varied sentence structure, strengthening oral expression. Role-play of situations such as a letter-writing scenario, a news broadcast or a village meeting offers authentic purposes for writing, so that compositions are drafted for an imagined audience rather than merely for the teacher. Reading aloud in character develops fluency and expressive intonation. Because Gujarati has a rich oral and performative heritage, including folk theatre traditions such as Bhavai, drama also connects classroom learning with the cultural experience that students already possess, an alignment consistent with the sociocultural emphasis on building learning from learners' lived contexts.

Theoretically, achievement gains in Gujarati are expected through improved comprehension, vocabulary use, expressive fluency and motivation, all of which feed into performance on written assessments.

5. Application to English Language Education

In Gujarati-medium schools, English is often learned with limited exposure outside the classroom. Students may know vocabulary and grammatical rules yet be unable to use English communicatively, and fear of making mistakes frequently inhibits speaking. This is the situation in which the arguments of Krashen (1982) and Swain (1985) are most pertinent.

Drama transforms English from a subject of study into a means of communication. Scripted and improvised dialogues, such as shopping at a store, asking directions or conducting an interview, allow students to use functional language in meaningful contexts. The use of gesture, props and context makes unfamiliar words comprehensible, supporting vocabulary retention through multisensory association. Pronunciation, stress and intonation improve through rehearsal and

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repetition that does not feel mechanical because it serves a dramatic purpose. Importantly, the role provides a mask behind which students can take linguistic risks. Podlozny (2000), in a meta-analysis of classroom drama studies, reported a strong link between drama and verbal skills, including oral and written language, and Fleming, Merrell and Tymms (2004) found positive effects of drama on pupils' language performance in primary schools. These findings are consistent with the theoretical expectation that drama strengthens language development.

For English education in Gujarati-medium classrooms, therefore, drama is theoretically justified as a means of increasing confidence, communicative competence and ultimately performance on achievement measures that assess vocabulary, grammar, comprehension and writing.

6. Application to Social Science Education

Social science in Standards 6 to 8 presents students with historical chronologies, geographical processes, civic institutions and economic concepts. These contents are often remote from students' experience and are expressed in specialised vocabulary, which makes them difficult to retain when taught only through exposition.

Drama brings the past and the distant into the classroom. Dramatising an episode from the freedom struggle, a debate in a village council, or the daily life of people in a particular region helps students to see events as the outcomes of human choices and circumstances rather than as lists of dates and names. Heathcote's approach, in which students adopt the role of experts engaged in solving a problem, positions them as active inquirers rather than passive recipients (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). Taking the perspective of another person also develops empathy and historical imagination, qualities that are central to social science understanding. Boal's (1979) forms of participatory theatre extend this further by inviting students to examine social issues, rehearse alternatives and consider how change might be brought about, which aligns with the civic aims of the subject.

From a cognitive standpoint, enactment creates vivid episodic memories attached to the content, improving retention, while the social negotiation of meaning deepens conceptual understanding. Achievement in social science is therefore expected to improve through better comprehension of concepts, stronger retention and increased interest in a subject that students often find tedious.

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7. Developmental Suitability of Drama for the Upper Primary Stage

Students aged roughly 11 to 14 are at a developmental threshold. They are developing abstract reasoning, a stronger sense of identity, and heightened sensitivity to peer opinion. These characteristics create both an opportunity and a risk for teaching. Peer approval can be harnessed through collaborative group work, which drama naturally provides, while self-consciousness can be managed through the protective frame of role and the ensemble nature of group tasks.

Early adolescents also have high energy and a need for movement, which conventional seated instruction suppresses. Drama channels this energy into learning. Emotional engagement matters as well: when students care about a character's predicament, they attend more closely and remember more. Finally, the stage corresponds to a period when students begin to make decisions about their academic self-concept. Positive experiences of success and belonging in drama-based lessons can support a favourable self-concept as learners, with long-term implications for achievement.

8. Policy Context

The theoretical argument for drama finds strong support in Indian educational policy. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 promoted constructivist, child-centred and activity-based learning and called for an end to rote learning (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2005). The National Education Policy 2020 emphasises experiential and art-integrated pedagogy, multilingualism, reduced content load and the development of critical thinking and creativity (Ministry of Education, 2020). It explicitly encourages arts integration as a pedagogical approach and recognises the value of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the early years. Educational drama is a concrete way of putting these policy orientations into practice, since it simultaneously integrates art with subject content, supports mother-tongue and second-language development, and builds the competencies of communication, collaboration and critical thinking that the policy identifies as essential.

9. A Conceptual Model of Drama and Academic Achievement

The theories reviewed above converge on a conceptual model in which educational drama influences academic achievement through four mediating processes.

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Embodied meaning-making. Enactment allows students to represent ideas through action and image before language, moving from the enactive to the symbolic mode (Bruner, 1966) and supporting deeper comprehension and retention.

Social interaction and scaffolding. Collaborative role work and teacher-in-role create zones of proximal development in which students reach higher levels of thinking and language use than they could alone (Vygotsky, 1978).

Emotional and motivational engagement. The imaginative frame lowers anxiety, raises interest and strengthens self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Krashen, 1982), increasing effort and persistence.

Reflective thinking. Discussion after enactment completes the experiential cycle (Kolb, 1984), converting experience into conceptual understanding and enabling transfer to written tests.

These four processes are expected to operate together in each of the three subject areas, though their relative weight differs. In Gujarati, expressive and comprehension processes are likely to be most prominent; in English, the lowering of anxiety and the provision of meaningful output are most significant; in social science, embodied meaning-making and perspective-taking carry the most weight. The model thus predicts that students taught through educational drama will show higher achievement in all three subjects than students taught through conventional methods, while allowing for variation in the magnitude of the effect.

10. Review of Supporting Evidence

Although this paper is theoretical, the model is not without empirical support. Podlozny's (2000) analysis of classroom drama research found consistent positive associations between drama and verbal achievement, particularly in oral language, reading and writing. Fleming et al. (2004) reported gains in pupils' language performance, along with improved attitudes, in primary schools using drama-based approaches. Evidence in mathematics and other subjects has been more mixed, and many studies suffer from small samples and short durations. This suggests that the benefits of drama are real but dependent on the quality, regularity and alignment of the dramatic activity with the learning objectives. A theoretical perspective helps to explain such variation: where drama is merely decorative and not tied to curricular content, the mediating processes of the model are weakly activated, and achievement effects should be correspondingly small.

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11. Challenges and Considerations

Several practical considerations temper the theoretical promise of drama. Teachers in many schools have little training in drama methods and may feel uncertain about managing a class in dramatic activity. Large class sizes, limited space, rigid timetables and syllabus pressure present further obstacles. Assessment systems that reward memorisation can discourage teachers from investing time in methods whose benefits lie in understanding. There is also the risk of superficiality: if drama becomes a performance exercise focused on entertainment, the reflective phase may be neglected and its learning value lost. Cultural and gender norms in some communities may influence students' willingness to participate in role-play, which teachers need to handle sensitively. Finally, the effect of drama on achievement is likely to depend on teacher skill, duration of intervention and fidelity of implementation, factors that researchers must document and control.

These challenges do not weaken the theoretical case but indicate the conditions under which it holds: structured lessons with clear learning outcomes, adequate teacher preparation, sustained use over time and a deliberate reflective component.

12. Implications

For teachers. Drama should be treated as a pedagogical tool integrated into regular subject teaching, with explicit learning objectives and a closing reflection. Short, structured activities such as freeze frames, hot-seating, role-play and improvised dialogue can be introduced without elaborate resources.

For teacher educators and curriculum developers. Pre-service and in-service programmes, including B.Ed. courses, should include practical training in educational drama and model lesson plans that link drama to the Gujarati, English and social science textbooks of Standards 6 to 8.

For researchers. The conceptual model offers testable hypotheses. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies should compare drama-based and conventional instruction on achievement tests that assess higher-order outcomes, while also measuring the proposed mediators, namely engagement, self-efficacy, anxiety and reflective thinking. Mixed-methods designs combining

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achievement data with classroom observation and student voice would capture the processes through which drama works.

For policy makers. Arts-integrated pedagogy should be supported through resources, time and training, and assessment should be aligned with competency-based outcomes so that experiential methods are not penalised.

13. Conclusion

The theoretical foundations of educational drama are broad and mutually reinforcing. Constructivism explains why enactment promotes understanding; sociocultural theory explains how social interaction and role scaffold higher thinking; experiential learning theory explains how reflection converts experience into knowledge; social learning theory and the notion of self-efficacy explain motivational gains; multiple intelligences theory explains inclusiveness; and language acquisition theory explains the specific benefits for Gujarati and English. When applied to social science, these same principles account for improved conceptual understanding and retention. For upper primary students, whose developmental needs for activity, peer interaction and emotional engagement are strong, drama offers a pedagogical fit that conventional instruction often lacks.

The conceptual model proposed here, in which embodied meaning-making, social scaffolding, emotional engagement and reflective thinking mediate the effect of drama on achievement, provides a foundation for empirical inquiry in Gujarati-medium classrooms. Its central proposition is that well-structured educational drama, sustained over time and tied to curricular content, can improve academic achievement in Gujarati, English and social science. Testing this proposition rigorously, and identifying the conditions under which it holds, is the task for future research.

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