CREATING DIALOGUE SPACE IN POST-PANDEMIC LEARNING THROUGH SPONTANEOUS DRAMATIZATION

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Abstract
During the COVID-19 pandemic, interaction between teachers and students was significantly reduced, leading to the emergence of emotional distance in educational settings. Even when limited face-to-face learning was permitted, this emotional gap was not easily resolved. In response to these challenges, dramatization emerges as a valuable pedagogical approach. As a method rooted in expressive performance, dramatization supports the development of students' social, emotional, and creative abilities, while also enhancing their understanding of academic subjects such as language, research, and cultural studies. In this context, dramatization refers to human activities that produce performative expressions in narrative or ritualistic forms. These performances, whether enacted individually or collectively, are communicative and emphasize self-presentation. Within the school setting, dramatization naturally occurs through peer interaction and informal role-playing between students and adults. Moreover, routine school activities themselves can be seen as dramatized behaviors, structured and repeated to shape a shared identity and provide moral or behavioral guidance. Schools, therefore, offer a privileged space to observe and cultivate dramatization as a dynamic component of the learning process. Integrating dramatization into education can bridge emotional gaps and enrich student engagement in both cognitive and affective domains.

1. Introduction

Since prehistoric times, Indonesian society has demonstrated an intuitive and enduring ability to dramatize—a capacity that has significantly shaped the trajectory of human evolution by contributing to the development of ritual, religion, and ultimately, the arts (Surakhman, 2021). While the precise historical origins of dramatization remain elusive, the human tendency to act out narratives, inhabit symbolic roles, and give expressive form to abstract experiences is universally acknowledged. Dramatization serves not only as a form of communication but also as a tool for coordination, self-expression, and cultural transmission.

In Indonesia, the academic recognition of dramatization in education emerged in the 1990s (Sumaryadi, 1990; Anwar, 1996), and was further institutionalized in the early 2000s through studies that explored its pedagogical value (Warta, 2002; Mariyah, 2005; Sumaryadi, 2006). In recent years, the method has gained traction across a range of educational contexts, particularly in language learning, due to its capacity to enhance emotional intelligence, foster creativity, deepen student engagement, and facilitate social interaction (Rosdiani, 2019; Muhammad Iqbal, 2020; Diana, 2020). However, despite its growing application, there remains a noticeable gap in empirical research on *spontaneous dramatization*—that is, dramatization not structured by curriculum but emerging organically within school life.

Recent theoretical advances (e.g., Pascarella et al., 2021) have begun to frame spontaneous dramatization as a natural and dialogical mode of meaning-making in educational settings. This study adopts such a framework, viewing dramatization as a performative activity that fuses narrative, ritual, and expressive behavior. Within the school environment, dramatization becomes a daily practice, manifested in how students and teachers construct and inhabit identities, roles, and symbolic spaces. Schools, in this sense, become fertile grounds for observing how dramatization unfolds in real time—as a lived, co-constructed performance of selfhood and social belonging.

To advance this understanding, this research presents an observational study conducted at SMKN 3 Malang during a period of limited face-to-face learning in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. This context provides a unique lens through which to view how students navigate identity reconstruction, emotional adaptation, and cultural reintegration following a prolonged period of social isolation. The study emphasizes dramatization as a dialogical and semiotic process that can mediate tensions between institutional demands and personal narratives. Drawing analogies with traditional Ludruk performances—where actors improvise daily stories with symbolic relevance (Azali, 2016; Hidajat, 2015)—students are seen as actively reinterpreting lived experiences, rather than passively enacting pre-defined roles (Zakiah et al., 2019).

Moreover, dramatization allows for symbolic distancing from the immediate world. Through language, imagery, gesture, and embodiment, students externalize inner conflicts and rehearse alternative identities, enabling meaning-making and emotional coherence (Ahmed & Wahab, 2019). In doing so, they simultaneously become the actors and observers of their own developmental journeys. These performances are grounded in narrative thinking (Stewart, 2015) and imaginative capacity (Gozli, 2020), drawing upon a vast cultural repertoire shaped by religion, folklore, myth, and tradition (Harari, 2017).

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding how spontaneous dramatization functions as a developmental and cultural mechanism in post-pandemic education. By highlighting the generative, reflexive, and symbolic dimensions of dramatization, this research offers a new perspective on how students reconstruct identity and reconnect with the world. In a time of social disruption and emotional fragmentation, dramatization emerges as a powerful educational resource—capable of restoring relational bonds, promoting self-awareness, and supporting holistic learning. This research is therefore crucial not only for expanding the theoretical scope of cultural psychology but also for informing pedagogical practices that nurture resilience, creativity, and dialogical engagement in the evolving landscape of post-pandemic schooling.

2. Methods

Schools serve as ideal contexts for observing spontaneous dramatization processes and for testing the hypothesis that such dramatization can function as a powerful tool to fill the emotional and psychological gaps created during the pandemic. Schools are not only complex organizations but also theatrical arenas for human expression (Li et al., 2020). Within this micro-socio-cultural context, students, teachers, administrative staff, cleaners, school managers, and even parents become actors performing roles directed toward achieving educational and social goals.

One significant moment to observe the construction of the school's socio-cultural stage is the beginning of the school year following the pandemic. At this stage, students are required to assume a new role within the school system—a role that demands the internalization of school

rules, values, and socio-cultural meanings into their personal narratives. This transition is often accompanied by psychological friction, which can, in turn, support the personal development of the student. Capturing this process requires a longitudinal perspective that emphasizes the dynamics of transformation rather than the final outcomes.

To explore this, the researcher conducted prolonged field observations at SMKN 3 Malang, a vocational high school in Malang City. A total of 120 hours of observation were carried out during school breaks across different days. Collaboration with the teachers allowed access to 71 students aged 18–19 years from grades X to XII. To preserve privacy and ethics, no identifying information was collected, and all names used in the report are pseudonyms.

Data were collected through direct field notes and reflective diary entries written during and immediately after observations. The focus was on identifying moments of spontaneous and guided dramatization within everyday school routines. Through an interpretive microanalysis approach, the researcher examined how these dramatizations create dialogical spaces, mediate emotional tensions, and reduce psychological distance between actors in the school setting. The findings suggest that spontaneous dramatization, intertwined with school routines, can be interpreted as a form of dramatized ritual.

Table 1. Overview of Observational Activities

Aspect	Details
Location	SMKN 3 Malang, East Java
Observation Duration	120 hours
Observation Period	During school breaks over several weeks
Participants	71 students (Grade X–XII, ages 18–19)
Research Focus	Spontaneous and guided dramatization
Data Collection Techniques	Field notes and diary-based reflective entries
Ethical Considerations	Use of pseudonyms; no personal data collected
Analytical Approach	Interpretive microanalysis
Key Objective	Identify dramatization as dialogical learning

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Beginning of School Year as a Stage of Dramatization

The results of this study begin with an overview of how the beginning of the school year becomes a transitional moment when teachers support students' transformation into their new roles. This is typically done through verbal and graphic self-presentations. Students are often asked to introduce themselves, which becomes their first dramatization ritual. Teachers assist in constructing and directing this dramatization by assigning symbolic tasks and classroom arrangements.

This micro-ritual helps students internalize boundaries of behavior and identity within the school environment (Sultonah & Kuntari, 2021). Even spatial arrangements and furnishings assist in situating the students in their new cultural context (Hviid, 2016). A student remarked, "I was nervous introducing myself, but when I stood in front of the class, it felt like acting in a play where I had to become 'a student'."

Figure 1. Students Stand while Singing Indonesian Anthem which is Dramatized in School Routine

3.2. School Uniform as Cultural Script

Another element of dramatization is the school uniform. At SMKN 3 Malang, students wear uniforms that symbolize academic maturity and status. Colors differentiate grade levels and express conformity to school norms. These uniforms also evoke cultural performances such as Ludruk, in which costumes represent role transitions.

Students' modifications or rejections of the uniform—such as wearing colored shoes or jackets—represent resistance to imposed identities. For instance, students A and F personalize their attire as a way of expressing individual preferences, challenging the standard image of a student. This tension between personal and institutional narratives is often negotiated through pedagogical authority. Student A stated, "I wear a jacket because the uniform doesn't feel like me. I'm still learning, but I don't want to feel invisible."

Table 2. Variations and Rejections of School Uniforms Observed

No	Student	Uniform Variation	Expressed Reason
1	A	Jacket worn over uniform	"To hide the ugliness of the uniform"
2	F	Colored shoes instead of black	"Color suits me better; black shoes are not me"
3	B	Rolled-up sleeves and custom patches	"Makes me feel like I'm not just another student"
4	D	Refused tie	"Too tight and uncomfortable, I can't breathe"

3.3. Daily Routines and Ceremonial Dramatization

Routines in the school day function as repeated dramatizations that reinforce collective identity. Activities such as singing the national anthem and praying together symbolize synchronized social and cultural behavior. These choreographed acts reflect both national and religious ideologies. One student explained, "Every morning feels the same—singing, praying—but somehow it makes the school day feel official."

Table 3. Daily School Routines and Their Symbolic Function

Routine Activity	Time	Symbolic Function
Singing National Anthem	07:00 AM	National identity, shared beginning
Morning Prayer	07:10 AM	Religious value, moral orientation
Classroom Clean-up	Before lessons	Responsibility and shared space ownership
End-of-day Prayer	Before going home	Closure, cultural continuity

3.4. Intersections of Individual and Collective Narratives

Dramatization is not purely personal—it is inherently dialogic and situated within broader sociocultural contexts. Individuals do not merely act out private impulses but engage in the performative negotiation of identity, values, and belonging. Through dramatization, people articulate their positions within a shared cultural framework, often navigating competing norms and expectations. This process inevitably generates tension, both intra-individual—such as the dissonance between one's internalized past and aspirational future selves—and inter-individual, as when personal routines or cultural practices come into friction with institutional structures or peer expectations.

This dynamic was vividly illustrated in the case of a student, P, who disrupted classroom activities by insisting on playing football during school hours. His behavior was not mere mischief but a form of expressive resistance grounded in familial routine. When confronted, he remarked, "At home, I always play football after breakfast, so school feels weird without it." This statement highlights the student's attempt to reconcile two normative orders: the embodied habitus of his home life and the disciplinary expectations of school. Rather than interpreting this solely as defiance, it reveals how dramatization can serve as a mechanism for asserting cultural identity within unfamiliar or restrictive environments.

The significance of this phenomenon lies in its pedagogical implications. Recognizing dramatization as a dialogic process encourages educators to understand student behavior not only in terms of compliance or deviance but also as meaningful acts of negotiation. In turn, this awareness can inform more culturally responsive approaches to teaching, where students' everyday life practices are not suppressed but integrated as part of the learning dialogue. Thus, dramatization becomes a vital lens through which identity formation and social adaptation in educational contexts can be understood.

3.5. Cultural Objects and Existential Resistance

Students often bring prohibited items to school that, while seemingly trivial or rule-breaking, actually carry significant personal meaning. These objects serve as symbolic bridges between the structured institutional world of the school and the more fluid, intimate realm of home life—particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which blurred the boundaries between public and private spaces. For many students, such items represent a continuity with their pre-pandemic routines, identities, and emotional anchors.

Table 4. Items Brought to School that Violate Rules

No	Item Name	Symbolic Meaning
1	Hair dryer	Personal grooming, comfort from home
2	Makeup Mirror	Self-image, continuity of private space
3	Uno Card	Leisure, recreation, connection to family activity
4	Chessboard	Strategy, personal expression, shared tradition
5	Football	Freedom, habitual action from home life
6	Badminton Racket	Identity outside academics, physical self-expression

One female student candidly expressed, *"Bringing my mirror makes me feel like I still have a part of my home here."* Her statement reveals more than attachment to an object; it reflects a desire to preserve a sense of self that existed outside the institutional frame of schooling. The mirror is not merely a tool for appearance management—it functions as a portal to a familiar space of autonomy, where personal agency and identity could be more fully expressed.

These objects, therefore, should not be dismissed as mere distractions or disciplinary infractions. Instead, they represent a silent dialogue between students and their environment—attempts to reclaim agency, maintain emotional equilibrium, and assert a holistic sense of identity in the face of institutional norms that often prioritize uniformity over individuality.

Understanding the symbolic function of these items opens up possibilities for more empathetic, student-centered pedagogical approaches. Rather than enforcing strict prohibition, educators might consider how such personal artifacts could be integrated into classroom life as resources for reflection, storytelling, or even interdisciplinary learning. In this way, schools can begin to acknowledge and value the rich, affective textures of students' lived experiences, allowing education to become a more inclusive and meaningful space of growth.

3.6. Negotiating the Ideal Student Image

Schools often construct and enforce a normative vision of the "ideal student"—a disciplined, orderly, and conforming individual—through both explicit rules and implicit cultural codes. This ideal is frequently inscribed onto students' bodies in physical forms such as standardized uniforms, posture, and especially appearance regulations like haircut requirements. These visible markers are not neutral; they serve as institutional tools to discipline identity and produce conformity, reinforcing the authority of the school as a regulatory space.

Students, however, do not passively accept this image. They actively negotiate, resist, reinterpret, or internalize such expectations based on their own cultural, familial, and personal identities. This negotiation becomes particularly pronounced when school demands clash with deeply rooted practices at home or with emerging self-concepts. In these moments, student agency becomes visible—not only in compliance but also in dissent.

For example, student K resisted haircut regulations by engaging in subtle but persistent acts of defiance, such as disruptive behavior in class and refusal to follow grooming rules. His resistance was met with threats of punishment rather than meaningful dialogue, highlighting a disciplinary approach that prioritized order over understanding. When asked about his refusal, K remarked, *"Why do I need to cut my hair like everyone else? I'm still the same person."* His statement articulates a crucial point: identity is not necessarily changed by surface-level conformity. The demand to standardize appearance becomes, in his view, a denial of individuality rather than an act of community building.

Figure 2. Students Whose Hair is Cut to Fulfill the Ideal Image the School Creates

This case exemplifies the tension between institutional authority and student subjectivity. The school's approach to constructing the ideal student is rooted in a logic of homogenization,

whereas students like K challenge this logic by asserting the complexity and multiplicity of their identities. Rather than viewing resistance as a problem to be eliminated, it can be understood as a communicative act—a call for recognition, dialogue, and flexibility.

The absence of a dialogical resolution in K's case reveals a missed opportunity for the school to engage with the student's perspective and create space for mutual negotiation. A more dialogic approach would not only help prevent recurring behavioral issues but also promote a more inclusive school culture that respects diversity within shared norms. Recognizing students as co-constructors of the school environment—rather than mere subjects of regulation—can shift the focus from discipline to dialogue, from control to collaboration.

3.7. Shared Dramatization and Liminal Space

Shared dramatization—when students collectively engage in symbolic, performative acts—serves as more than just play or expression. It becomes a powerful medium for reducing interpersonal tension and fostering communal bonds. Through these shared acts, students enter what Popper (2016) calls a *liminal space*—an in-between zone that suspends ordinary rules and hierarchies, allowing participants to temporarily step outside of fixed roles, identities, and power structures.

Within this liminal space, students are granted the freedom to explore and reconfigure aspects of their cultural, familial, and institutional selves. It becomes a site where diverse cultural backgrounds are not only represented but *hybridized*, producing new forms of interaction and mutual understanding. The dramatization acts as a shared ritual that opens space for what Bakhtin might call dialogic negotiation—a mutual responsiveness where identity is not imposed, but co-constructed.

This was observed in group performances or informal role-play sessions, where students improvised characters drawn from both school and home contexts—combining religious idioms with pop culture, or using Javanese family expressions in satirical depictions of teachers. While these acts might appear rebellious or humorous on the surface, they actually represent sophisticated processes of cultural translation and critique. In this liminal performance zone, power dynamics are temporarily destabilized, allowing students to express internal tensions and external pressures in symbolic ways that are less confrontational, yet deeply meaningful.

Moreover, the collective nature of the experience enables students to feel seen and validated by their peers. For example, during a mock courtroom performance where students judged fictional versions of themselves for "violating school norms," laughter served as a social lubricant—but the content revealed real anxieties about conformity, acceptance, and identity. In such spaces, dramatization does not merely entertain; it educates, empowers, and facilitates emotional processing.

Critically, this form of joint dramatization offers pedagogical possibilities. If schools can recognize and support these liminal zones—not as disruptions but as generative cultural spaces—they can foster environments where reflective dialogue thrives. Rather than enforcing uniform behavioral standards, educators might tap into dramatization as a mode of critical inquiry: a way to explore social norms, power, belonging, and identity. By legitimizing these expressive practices within the curriculum, the school affirms students' voices as co-creators of meaning and culture.

In essence, shared dramatization allows the invisible threads of cultural negotiation to become visible. It transforms the classroom into a performative commons—where students can

rehearse not only scenes, but selves, and where the tensions between institutional expectations and personal histories become material for growth rather than sources of alienation.

3.8. Dialogue as a Solution to Tension

While dramatization effectively brings latent tensions to the surface—making visible the competing values, identities, and norms within the school environment—it is *dialogue* that offers a sustainable pathway toward resolution and transformation. Unlike disciplinary interventions that often suppress or redirect conflict without addressing its roots, dialogue invites participants into a process of mutual recognition, meaning-making, and reconstruction.

Dialogue, in this sense, is not merely conversational exchange, but a *pedagogical and relational act* (Freire, 1970). It requires active listening, openness to otherness, and a willingness to be changed by the encounter. Through authentic dialogue, both individual and collective narratives can be revisited, reinterpreted, and reoriented. In this space, students are not merely regulated or instructed—they become co-authors of meaning within the educational landscape.

This dialogic engagement enables students and educators to reinterpret past experiences (e.g., perceived disobedience, cultural misalignment, or behavioral conflict) in new light. A student who resisted institutional norms, for instance, might discover through dialogue that their actions were rooted in values shared with others, though expressed differently. Likewise, teachers might come to recognize that what they once perceived as defiance was, in fact, a search for identity, recognition, or inclusion.

Dialogue also allows the *projection of shared futures*. It creates space for envisioning what kind of school culture participants want to co-create—one that honors both individuality and collectivity, both structure and flexibility. In this way, identity is no longer fixed or oppositional, but becomes fluid, negotiated, and responsive to changing contexts. Through dialogue, students reorganize their sense of self—not by abandoning previous affiliations, but by integrating them into a broader narrative of belonging.

In practice, such dialogic processes might take the form of structured class discussions, restorative circles, participatory rule-making, or informal teacher-student conversations that go beyond reprimand. The key lies in framing school not as a space of correction, but as a space of *co-construction*.

When dialogue is institutionalized—not just permitted, but valued and facilitated—tension no longer signals breakdown. Instead, it becomes a productive force, revealing sites of growth and mutual transformation. Ultimately, dialogue shifts the school from a site of behavior management to a space of *relational pedagogy*, where education becomes a shared journey of becoming.

3.9. The Dynamo of Cultural Self-Transformation

One particularly illustrative case involved student K, who consistently found himself in conflict—not only with institutional authority figures such as teachers but also with his peers. K's behaviors, which included vocal resistance to rules, mock-performances in class, and emotional outbursts, were not random acts of defiance. Rather, they functioned as dramatizations of deeper cultural and psychological tensions. These tensions reflected both *intra-individual conflicts* (his struggle to integrate his home-based identity with the expectations of school culture) and *inter-individual frictions* (his clashes with figures of authority and social norms).

K's enactments can be read as attempts to externalize and process the contradictions he experienced internally. However, in the absence of sustained, meaningful dialogue and reflective space, the potential for transformation embedded within these acts was left unrealized. The institution responded largely through control—threats of punishment, isolation, and moral appeals—rather than engagement. Consequently, the cathartic value of dramatization remained isolated, unable to evolve into deeper forms of identity renegotiation.

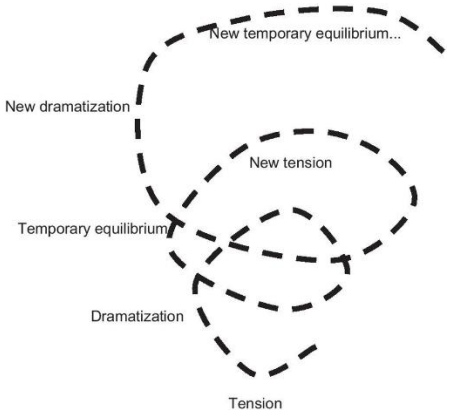

Figure 3. The Continuous Cycle of Tension, Dramatization, and Temporary Balance (source: Pascarella et al., 2021)

This pattern is emblematic of a broader cycle, as visualized in Figure 3. In this model, *tension* arises from cultural or interpersonal contradictions; *dramatization* functions as an expressive response that temporarily reorganizes the self; and a momentary *balance* is achieved. However, in the absence of continued reflexivity and relational dialogue, this balance is fleeting—soon disrupted by new tensions.

Mather (2020) likens dramatic tension to a *short circuit*—a burst of expressive energy that releases pressure and generates catharsis. Yet as Valsiner (2016) argues, the true energy that sustains identity development does not lie in isolated moments, but in the *recursive negotiation* between the self and its sociocultural environment. It is through these ongoing interactions—sometimes harmonious, often conflictual—that the self is continually shaped and reshaped.

Thus, dramatization should not be viewed as mere reactionary behavior or emotional overflow. It is a *creative and recursive force*—a mechanism through which cultural meaning is reworked and identity is re-assembled. In this light, student K's rebellion was not a breakdown of discipline, but an invitation to understand how individuals make sense of themselves amid conflicting demands.

Moreover, dramatization enables what might be termed *cultural improvisation*: individuals take available cultural signs and repurpose them in ways that express emerging configurations of self. These improvisations are not always neat or institutionally approved, but they are *developmentally vital*. Without structures that support this improvisational reflexivity—such as dialogic teaching, reflective pedagogy, or culturally responsive spaces—cultural stability becomes fragile, and identity remains vulnerable to fragmentation.

In conclusion, dramatization, when supported by dialogic engagement and reflexive practices, becomes a *dynamo of cultural self-transformation*. It does not merely resolve tension—***it*** *generates* new cultural forms and personal trajectories. Educators, therefore, must not only tolerate dramatization but recognize and nurture its generative potential as part of a dynamic educational ecology.

4. Conclusion

This study has provided a foundational understanding of spontaneous dramatization in post-pandemic learning, particularly among students transitioning back into structured educational environments. As a form of socialization, dramatization holds intrinsic value in the co-construction of meaning. While its application in education is well established, the specific role of spontaneous dramatization in shaping student identity and emotional development remains underexplored. The findings suggest that spontaneous dramatization functions as a semantic reconstruction process, allowing individuals to dialectically engage with and distance themselves from the phenomenal world. It emerges through complex encounters between existential and personal cultural narratives, and it unfolds its transformative potential through liminality and meaningful dialogue. Dramatization thus provides a flexible structure for navigating momentary tensions and reconstructing meaning within dynamic sociocultural contexts. Dialogue between teachers and students is vital in co-creating understanding and acts as a conduit for broader social transformation. It enables students to narrate, negotiate, and reconstruct their identities within a collective educational framework. In this sense, imagination and narrative thinking are essential for the ontogenetic emergence of dramatization. Spontaneous dramatization highlights the need for students to simultaneously act as writers, directors, performers, and audiences of their own existential narratives. Without such multimodal engagement, personal development risks stagnation. Therefore, dramatization stands as a critical pedagogical tool for fostering self-realization and socio-emotional growth, particularly in periods of social uncertainty. Future research should continue to investigate spontaneous dramatization across diverse educational contexts, developmental stages, and longitudinal perspectives to deepen our understanding of how it shapes identity, supports emotional resilience, and sustains dynamic learning communities in a changing world.

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