

# Drama therapy student research in North America: a narrative review

## Abstract

This study gathered available student theses focused on drama therapy in North America with an aim to highlight, organize, categorize, and increase accessibility to drama therapy master's theses and dissertations, as well as to understand possible future trajectories of the field, based on student work. In a narrative review, 192 theses and dissertations submitted to four different schools between the years 2017–2022 were categorized into five domains: research method, drama therapy theory, intervention and integration focus, population, and setting. A broad variety of research interests were identified throughout the theses and dissertations. Students demonstrated an engagement with the extant knowledge base of drama therapy as well as an interest in the current trends of empirical drama therapy research. Furthermore, students' theses expanded the field of drama therapy by applying drama therapy in novel settings or with seldom-researched populations, as well as creating new or expanded methods and theories of drama therapy. As such, students' theses enrich the field as a whole and guide drama therapy research in new directions.

**Keywords:** graduate theses, drama therapy, drama therapy pedagogy, knowledge competencies, NADTA, student database, North America, bibliometric analysis

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## Introduction

In North America, there are currently six graduate schools accredited by the North American Drama Therapy Association (NADTA) where students can earn a degree associated with drama therapy. Research, for drama therapy students, is an educational requirement to become a registered drama therapist (RDT) in North America through the NADTA. Each of the six academic programs has a version of a master's project, thesis, or capstone. Wood & Reynolds [1] outlined current educational competencies needed to become an RDT, via an NADTA education committee, which included research competencies. The authors wrote, "Drama therapists are expected to have [...] a basic understanding of how to conduct research with cultural humility, ethical awareness and in a professional manner" (p. 183). Though research is a program requirement, as of yet there is no way to track or curate student research across universities.

With an aim to highlight, organize, categorize, and increase accessibility to drama therapy master's theses and dissertations, the student research subcommittee was created under the current Research Chair of the NADTA (first author). Current members of the committee are dedicated to increasing the visibility of drama therapy student research, while providing a valuable resource, via a spreadsheet available on the NADTA website [2] for current university and alternative track (AT) program students, graduates and professionals, incoming students, and allied professionals. The spreadsheet, broken into multiple categories, serves as a way to categorize and understand the depth and breadth of drama therapy student research.

In building the spreadsheet for community use, a research study was undertaken asking, *What do students in NADTA accredited, academic drama therapy courses examine in their master theses?* Theses and dissertations were collected via online searches when available (Concordia

University and Lesley University) and through connecting with heads of drama therapy programs (Kansas State University and New York University). Notably, there are currently no theses or dissertations from Antioch University or California Institute of Integrated Studies, not because students do not engage in research at these schools, but because currently there is not a system in place to access these pieces, some of which are performance-based projects.

This research follows the empirical research committees project [3] and the theory research committees project (forthcoming) commitment to organizing drama therapy literature in the field and making it more accessible to community members, as well as understanding how this work impacts the field at large. Each year, there are approximately 100 students who are graduating from North American drama therapy programs, many of whom engaged in a research project prior to graduation. This research represents the interests of the newest voices in our field, voices that need to be encouraged and cultivated for those who wish to continue engaging in research. By developing emergent researchers we are able to not only increase the rate of research, but diversity of research, creating spaces for our newest drama therapists to shift and shape the trajectory of theoretical and empirical research. The results of this study can be used as a guide to where the field is going, as graduates leave the role of student and enter the role of clinician and researcher.

With this project, we hope to elevate student research and help shift the narrative of student theses from just being an ending to the student role to becoming an entrance into the researcher role. Additionally, we wish to highlight the diverse perspectives and topics of interest represented in student research and to have a central space (via the spreadsheet on the NADTA website) in which to access student research.

## Drama therapy pedagogy and research

The pedagogical approach and curriculum design of graduate-level education for drama therapists in North America is emergent [1], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8]. In turn, the training of drama therapy students as researchers is diverse and inconsistent. Generally, graduate programs that train clinicians in the psychotherapy fields concentrate on the application of practice, while research training is more likely to occur in doctoral programs [9]. The focus on practice is especially emphasized in drama therapy education, which utilizes experiential learning in its pedagogy as a way to teach clinicians drama therapy interventions and approaches [4], [7]. However, in order for the field of drama therapy to continue its growth trajectory, there must be a stronger focus on research [10], [11], [12].

In recent years there have been strides made through the NADTA to increase engagement in research, including the formation of drama therapy review [13] and the creation of the research chair position in 2015 [3]. These

initiatives have added immensely to publications in the field of drama therapy [14], however, there has yet to be a research focus examining student work. Jones [15] called for research "...dialogue and exchange within our discipline" (p. 97) for those working within the field. With the project, we are extending the call to student researchers.

There seems to be little literature focused on the research education of psychotherapy students, especially at the master's degree level. It stands to reason that one way to increase engagement in research for students and emergent researchers is through mentorship. Swift et al. [16] investigated questionable research practices (QRPs) among doctoral students and faculty ( $N=274$ ) and found that students who were more fully involved with their faculty mentor were less likely to have engaged in QRPs. Douglas et al. [17] addressed the research-to-practice gap by examining the power differential that exists between clinicians and researchers and found that encouraging collaborations between the two can help to diminish the power difference.

One way to mitigate this in the drama therapy field is by engaging with students in the research process while they are still students, or as recent graduates. This may help them see themselves in the role of researcher. To encourage emergent researchers in drama therapy, many of whom are recent graduates, a program that fostered a research mentor/mentee relationship was created through the NADTA [18]. Research mentorship programs in our field can help cultivate emergent researchers who would benefit from a more focused partnership with an established researcher. Another program that trains drama therapy student researchers are the labs at Lesley University. The labs, run by drama therapy faculty, reflect faculty and student research interests and have resulted in multiple publications [19], [20], [21], [22]. In addition, this research project serves as another way for emergent researchers to engage in the work and help direct the scope and interests of the field.

What the mentorship program and research labs have in common is that they connect researchers, emergent and established, with common interests, to increase engagement in research in the field. Constien and Junker [14] found that there has been an increase in researcher collaboration in drama therapy, particularly in the instances when articles are written with the support of an affiliated institution, such as a professor leading a research study with student support; one intention of this study is to continue that trajectory by connecting recent graduates and encouraging new research partnerships.

## Method

The aim of this research study was to provide a general overview of the available body of work produced by students enrolled in NADTA accredited, academic drama therapy courses via a narrative review [23], [24], and bibliometric analysis (i.e., school, year of publication,

keywords) [25], [26]. The research question guiding this project, intentionally broad to allow for a general overview, was: *What do students in NADTA accredited, academic drama therapy courses examine in their master theses?* This research question led to five distinct domains of investigation that further guided the research process: drama therapy theory, research method, setting, population, and intervention and integration focus.

## Narrative review

A narrative review was chosen as the method for this research study as it affords researchers the ability to take an adaptive approach [23], [27] whereas a systematic review takes a preset, structured approach to literature inquiry. The narrative review is a less restrictive method, not requiring a standardized technique for investigating an area of interest. The method offers a widened scope for inclusion of literature and seeks primarily to describe published literature as a broad overview [24], [28]. While a systematic review traditionally adopts PRISMA [29] a narrative review facilitates an author's preference for how to best represent literature findings according to a research question [23]. In this way, the research team was able to organize results based on our conceptualizations of trends, links, and/or major implications in response to our research question. In addition, organizing the bibliometric data by school, year of publication, and keywords, allowed the research team to further understand trends in student theses.

## Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Although the scope of this research project was intentionally broad, several inclusion and exclusion criteria were specified. First, only theses or dissertations (henceforth collectively referred to as 'theses') in the field of drama therapy as defined by the NADTA (<https://www.nadta.org/what-is-drama-therapy>) were included. Consequently, only theses submitted as part of the course requirements of an NADTA accredited academic drama therapy course (i.e. Antioch University, California Institute of Integral Studies, Concordia University, Lesley University, Kansas State University, New York University) were considered. In turn, theses that may be on drama therapy, but were written outside the field of drama therapy (i.e., not from an NADTA accredited course; acting programs, social work) were not included within this study. Nor were theses written by alternative track (AT) students prior to enrolling into the AT program (alternative training in drama therapy outside academic institutions accredited by the NADTA) as there is no accessible database with this information. Furthermore, in order to provide a current view of the body of literature produced by students, only theses submitted within the years 2017 to 2022 were included. Lastly, to allow a categorization of theses based on content rather than only bibliometric data (e.g., school, year of submission, etc.), theses must have been accessible

to a member of the research team at either title and abstract, or full-text level to be considered within this study.

## Procedure

This research study included procurement of the data, a pre-data analysis phase of identification and organization of keywords, and data analysis via categorization. Detailed steps of these three phases are outlined below:

### 1. Procurement

Each school was contacted at the beginning of this research project via e-mail to inform them of the goals of this research and to inquire about current standards of capstone theses at their school as well as their individual system of keeping a list or repository of students' work and the possibility of accessing these lists. Access to students' theses was facilitated for Lesley University and Concordia University via an open-access online repository and in the case of Kansas State University via a hand search of physical copies of the theses by author Alivia Holkesvig, on the premises of the University. Additionally, New York University provided a comprehensive list of theses including author, title, abstract and keywords, when available. Once access to the student's work was facilitated, bibliometric information (author, title, abstract, keywords, school, year) were entered into a shared GoogleSheet by one of the research team members. To ensure that, as per inclusion criteria, only theses written exclusively on drama therapy were included, a second member of the research team member-checked each entry. Cases of disagreement were settled via discussion between a minimum of two research team members.

### 2. Pre-data analysis: identification and organization of keywords

In order to gain a comprehensive overview of themes discussed in the students' theses, a comprehensive keyword analysis was conducted prior to any further categorization. However, 46% of theses did not include author-generated keywords. Consequently, the research team generated keywords based on the title and abstract in the initial step of the analysis. Furthermore, to allow for comparison between theses, author-generated keywords were adjusted to match the created vocabulary of keyword terms. This keyword generation was done asynchronously by members of the research team and ultimately discussed by all members of the research team for consensus.

### 3. Data analysis: categorization

Following the identification of theses keywords, the theses were sorted into categories along the five domains of investigation, which emerged during the initial narrative review of the data: drama therapy theory, research method, setting, population, and intervention and integra-

tion focus. Categories were created inductively based on theses' titles, abstracts, and keywords. Each domain was initially populated with theses by one member of the research team. The final categorization was in turn member-checked by at least one other researcher to establish consensus. Disagreements were settled via discussion by two or more team members.

In a preliminary bibliometric analysis, theses' bibliometric data (i.e., school, year of publication, keywords) were evaluated in the form of an output analysis [25], [26] using a Python script within a jupyter notebook. Both the dataset and steps of analysis are available open-access [30], [31]. During the narrative review [23], [24], subcategories under each of the five domains were created after an understanding of trends and links in the data emerged. The final organizational scheme entailing categories and sub-categories for each domain of investigation was examined for the number of included theses as well as their main findings in order to present a comprehensive view of the range and focus of students' work in the field of drama therapy.

## Results

### Bibliometric overview

In sum, the search for student work in the field of drama therapy yielded 192 theses submitted between the years 2017 to 2022. On average, 32 theses were published per year. Most theses ( $n=40$ ) were published in 2020. A majority of theses were submitted to New York University ( $n=72$ ), closely followed by Lesley University ( $n=69$ ), then Concordia University ( $n=43$ ) and Kansas State University ( $n=8$ ). The number of theses submitted per year and school are displayed in Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively.

89 theses did not include any author-generated keywords. Consequently, the research team generated keywords for theses missing them, based on the title and abstract, and adjusted author-generated keywords to match the overall keyword structure. Following this procedure, most indexed theses ( $n=176$ , 92%) were associated with keywords. 16 references in turn, for which no abstract or full paper was available to generate keywords from, remained without associated keywords. Consequently, these theses were not considered for further categorization. After the process of writing researcher-generated keywords, the student work featured 480 individual keywords. Out of these, *drama therapy* was the most prominent with 138 mentions, followed by *literature review* (57 mentions), *role theory/role method* (41 mentions), *qualitative research* (32 mentions) and *performance-based drama therapy* (28 mentions). Most keywords ( $n=322$ , 67%), however, were only used by a single thesis. In turn, 158 keywords were used by more than one student. The frequencies of keywords are displayed in Figure 3. The 13 most used keywords (more than 15

mentions) are displayed in Table 1 alongside the number of theses mentioning them.

**Table 1: Most used keywords**

Keyword	<i>n</i>
drama therapy	138
literature review	57
role theory/role method	41
qualitative research	32
performance-based drama therapy	28
arts-based research	18
autoethnography	17
therapeutic theatre	17
core processes	16

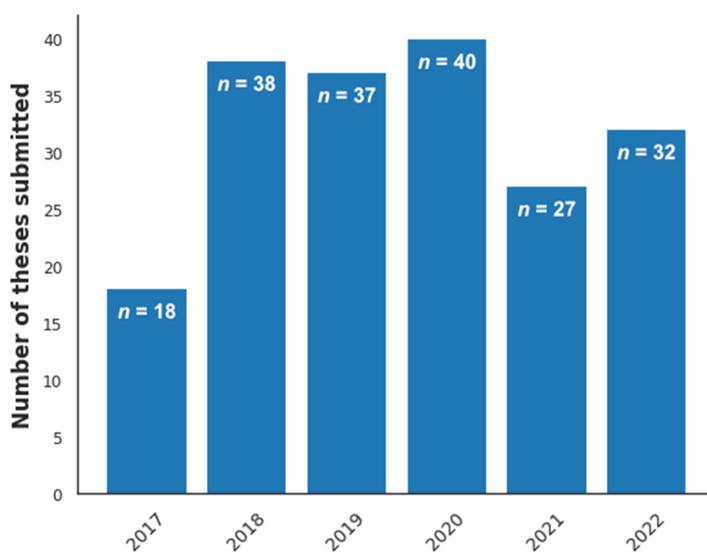
Only keywords with more than 15 mentions ( $n=9$ ) are being displayed.

### Research method

The investigation regarding the utilized research method of each thesis produced the three categories of empirical research, practice-based theses, and theoretical theses, each of which was further refined into sub-categories. The numbers of theses in each category per school are presented in four separate pie charts in Figure 4.

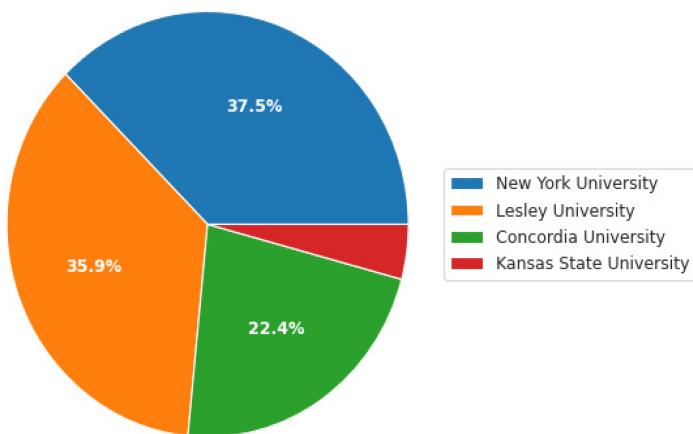
The category of empirical research contained the sub-categories of qualitative research ( $n=48$ ), arts-based research ( $n=36$ ), mixed-methods research ( $n=10$ ) and quantitative research ( $n=1$ ). The largest out of these, qualitative research, contained theses which utilized qualitative methods of data collection and analysis to empirically assess the training, application, or impact of drama therapy for clients and participants, creative arts therapists, or audience members. Theses categorized within arts-based research were similarly focused on the outcomes of drama therapy interventions, however, used art-making, such as writing or performance, as data, results, or both. The vast majority of arts-based research centered on art generated by the author. Additionally, three theses in this category analyzed art produced by clients [32], [33], [34]. The sub-category of mixed-methods research contained theses that utilized a combination of arts-based research, qualitative research, and/or quantitative research. Theses within this sub-category transformed qualitative results into a piece of theatre [35], [36] or other art-making processes [37], [38], [39] in order to substantiate the analysis or complement the research presentation. Other theses combined qualitative and quantitative results to comprehensively research drama therapy interventions [40], [41], [42] or compassion fatigue in drama therapists [43]. The one thesis utilizing a purely quantitative approach was submitted to Kansas State University and presented results from a within-subjects design probing the impact of theatre on the audience's awareness of mental illness [44].

The category of Practice-Based Theses was segregated into the two sub-categories of Treatment Protocol ( $n=22$ ),



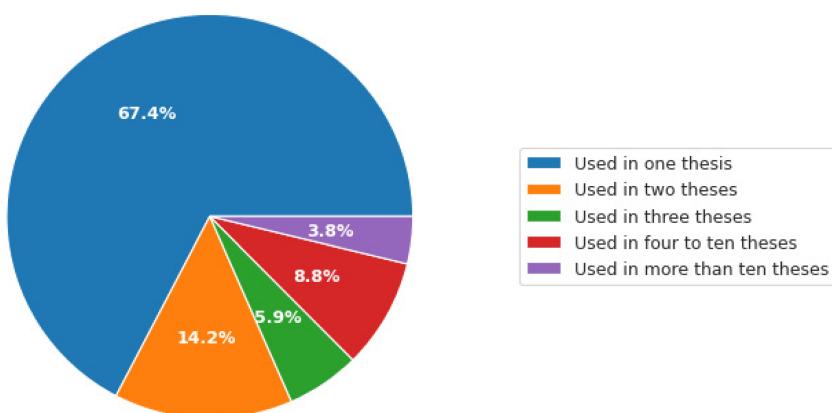
Note: N=192

Figure 1: Number of theses and dissertations submitted per year



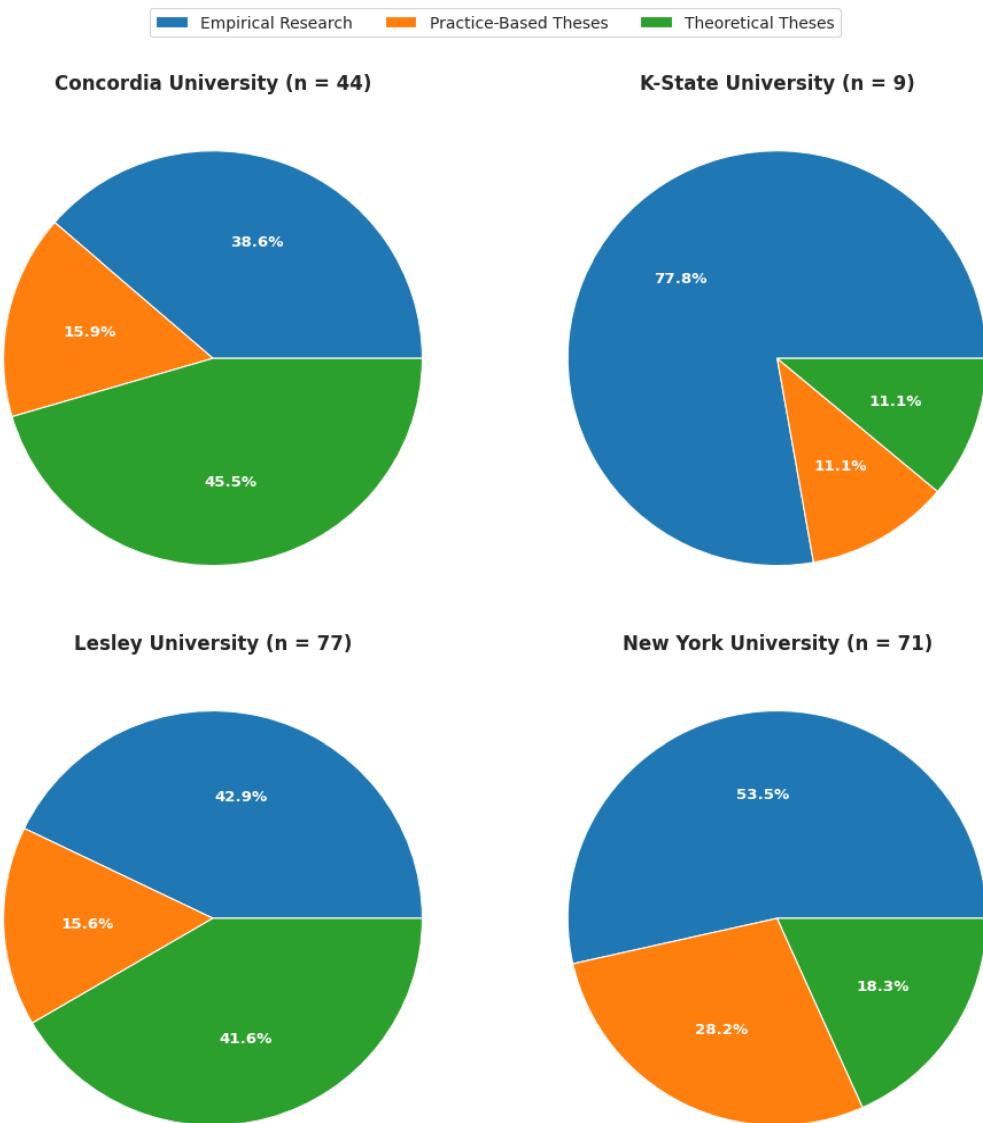
Note: N=192

Figure 2: Number of theses and dissertations submitted per school



Note: N (individual keywords)=480

Figure 3: Usage of keywords



Note: Theses may appear in more than one category or sub-category

**Figure 4: Research methods in students' theses**

meaning research that used a novel approach to an intervention or curriculum, and development of a method ( $n=18$ ), which presented research that developed novel interventions grounded in theory. Students' treatment protocols outlined practical approaches to drama therapy with a variety of clients centering identity development [45], [46], [47], [48], trauma symptoms [49], [50], [51], [52], social and emotional skills [53], [54], managing chronic [55], [56] or mental illnesses [34], [57], [58], enhancing the therapeutic alliance [59], [60], aging [61], [62] or combating systematic oppression [63], [64], [65]. Theses grouped into the sub-category of development of a method explored the theoretical application of an author-generated method of drama therapy [66], [67], [68], [69], [70], [71], [72], [73] or presented practical experiences of novel methods utilized with clients [74], [75], [76], [77], [78], [79], [80]. Additionally, three theses were

self-reflexive and involved the student testing their novel approach on themselves [36], [81], [82]. The category of theoretical theses contained 65 theses further divided into literature review ( $n=40$ ) and theoretical research ( $n=25$ ). The sub-category of literature review contained 40 theses exploring drama therapy in combination with methods or theories from other fields based on extant literature. The sub-category of theoretical research contained 25 theses which offered a new theory, based on the literature explored. The defining difference between theoretical research and literature review was that literature review presented non-systematic examinations of the current literature associated with the thesis topic, while theoretical research presented a new theory, based on the literature, of how the intersecting topics connected, and often featured a case illustration. Within the literature review subcategory, 78% of the entries came from Lesley University where one of the three thesis op-

tions is writing a literature review. The theses in this subcategory varied widely in topics and were spread out amongst the other four domains of inquiry. Within the theoretical research, 19 (76%) of the theses were submitted through Concordia University.

To further examine the nature of the students' work with respect to their chosen research method, a  $\chi^2$ -test of independence was performed. To meet the assumptions of the test (i.e., sample size and expected cell frequencies), only a subset of the presented data from the three Schools Concordia, Lesley, and New York University were examined. Theses submitted to Kansas State University were not included given their low sample size. The relationship between these categories and the three different schools was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(4)=13.15$ ,  $p=.011$ , indicating a significant association between the schools and their students chosen research method in their capstone theses. Figure 5 presents this data visually.

## Drama therapy theory

Investigation of the main drama therapy theories centered in the students' theses produced eight categories (Table 2): core processes, developmental transformations, drama therapy education (Table 3), narradrama, (Table 2) performance-based drama therapy (Table 4), psychodrama/sociodrama, role method/role theory, and table top role play (Table 2). Additionally, the categories of drama therapy education (Table 3) and performance-based drama therapy (Table 4) contained seven and ten sub-categories, respectively.

**Table 2: Drama therapy theory**

Category	N (total)	N (per school)
Core processes	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 7</li> <li>Lesley: 5</li> <li>NYU: 6</li> </ul>
Developmental transformations	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 6</li> <li>NYU: 4</li> </ul>
Narradrama	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 2</li> <li>K-State: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 1</li> </ul>
Psychodrama/ sociodrama	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 1</li> <li>NYU: 2</li> </ul>
Role method/ role theory	34	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 2</li> <li>K-State: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 15</li> <li>NYU: 16</li> </ul>
Table top role play	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 1</li> <li>K-State: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 1</li> <li>NYU: 1</li> </ul>

Note: Theses may appear in more than one category or sub-category.

The theory of the core processes yielded 18 theses spread almost evenly among Concordia, Lesley University, and NYU. These theses focused on both the core processes as a whole or examined core processes individually, or in an isolated manner (i.e., embodiment and dramatic projection only).

The theses on developmental transformations (DvT) used the method with a variety of populations, such as active duty service members [83] mental health professionals [84], those with mental health issues [39], and immigrants [85] in a variety of settings, such as psychiatric units [86], [87] and virtual spaces [88]. One piece, a dissertation, by Pitre [89] used a grounded theory approach and focused on expanding and deepening the understanding of DvT terminology.

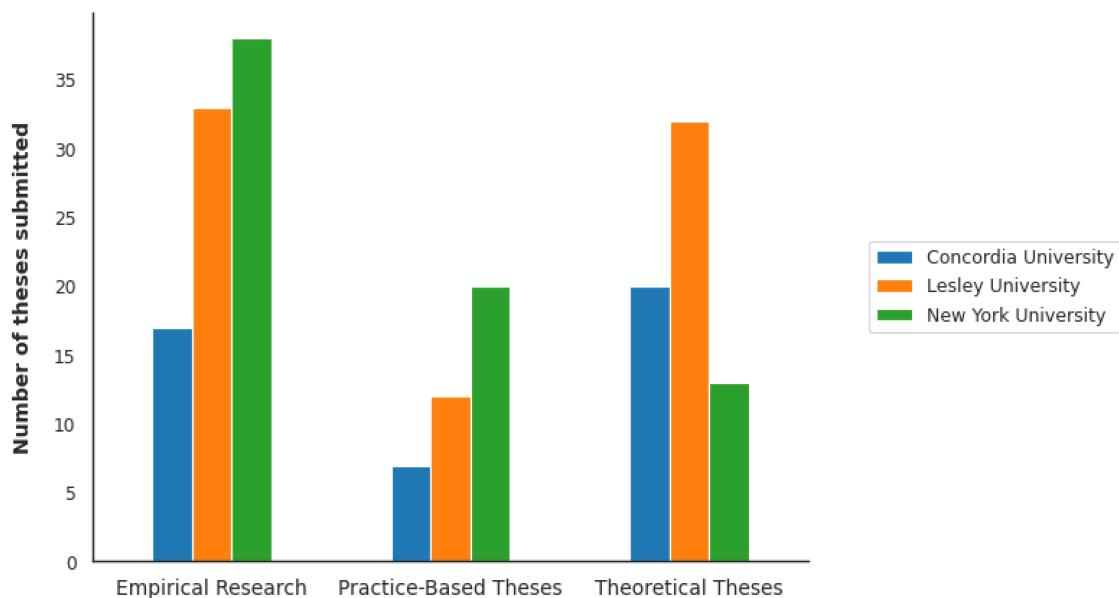
Three of the four theses using narradrama dealt with marginalized populations: indigenous peoples [90] and LGBTQIA+/Queer populations [91], [92]. The final thesis in this category examined using narradrama to process traumatic childbirth [93].

The drama therapy theory of psychodrama/sociodrama yielded four theses. Three of the four theses [47], [48], [83] are cross-listed in other drama therapy theory categories meaning that only one centers psychodrama/sociodrama as its only drama therapy theory, as it's defined in this project [94]. One thesis focused on bibliodrama [47] and examined religious allegory to explore queer identity.

34 theses were grouped in the category of role method/role theory. Nine theses engaged with participants with a range of disabilities [40], [41], [52], [55], [57], [77], [95], [96], four addressed race or racial equity [81], [90], [97], [98] and two worked with LGBTQIA+/Queer participants [86], [99]. Additionally, theses explored the expansion of the original role taxonomy [100] by introducing greater diversity of roles, including working with Filipinos [48], LGBTQIA+/Queer populations [72], [101], adults with addictions [80], and Black Americans [102]. Table top role play is an emergent approach, using both drama therapy theory and role-playing games, and the four theses [45], [103], [104], [105] utilizing this method were published between 2019 and 2022 across all surveyed schools.

The category drama therapy education contained theses that focused on issues salient to the education and clinical training of the drama therapist. Theses within this category are further divided into seven sub-categories (see Table 3).

The sub-category of group therapy contained 12 theses proposing new approaches or intervention designs for group drama therapy with a wide range of clients [34], [48], [50], [57], [62], [73], [75], [87], [99], [106], [107], [108]. The sub-category of identity contained 15 theses that reviewed or developed drama therapeutic approaches addressing concepts of identity such as self-confidence [98], [102], [109], [110], self-awareness [111], personal development [47], [112], [113] or claiming one's identity [36], [47], [98], [110], [113], [114]. Additionally, a number of theses were written in reflection on students' own



Note: Theses submitted to Kansas State University were not considered in this analysis given their low sample size.

**Figure 5: Barplot of theses' research methods**

**Table 3: Drama therapy theory: drama therapy education**

Sub-category	N (total)	N (per school)
Group therapy	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 3</li> <li>Lesley: 8</li> <li>NYU: 2</li> </ul>
Identity	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 2</li> <li>Lesley: 8</li> <li>NYU: 5</li> </ul>
Self-reflexivity	27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 14</li> <li>NYU: 13</li> </ul>
Supervision	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NYU: 5</li> </ul>
Touch	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 1</li> </ul>
Therapeutic alliance	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 3</li> <li>NYU: 2</li> </ul>
Transference & countertransference	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 1</li> <li>NYU: 4</li> </ul>

Note: Theses may appear in more than one category or sub-category.

development of a clinical identity as a drama therapist [115], [116], [117]. By extension, the sub-category self-reflexivity included 28 theses reporting on students' self-reflexive processes in their training or work as drama therapists using qualitative and arts-based self-supervision methods.

The sub-category of supervision contained five theses submitted to New York University describing the self-reflective practice of students in their clinical training. Three theses explored the process of developing and applying their own tools of self-supervision [82], [118], [119] while two other theses describe the utilization of the R-Rap [120], [121] as a tool to reflect one's own clinical drama therapeutic practice [115], [122].

The category of therapeutic alliance contained five theses describing the nature [84], [123], [124], assessment [60]

and development [125] of the relationship between drama therapist and client.

The subcategory of touch contained two theses. The first examined how touch can be used with older adults to increase intimacy in drama therapy sessions [62]. The second discussed how we consider touch within the field of drama therapy, and the work that needs to be done to continue to clarify the ethics and understanding around this topic [126].

Finally, the sub-category of transference & countertransference contained six theses. One thesis re-conceptualized the traditional psychodynamic construct of countertransference from a drama therapeutic perspective through concepts from role theory via a literature review [127]. Other theses within this sub-category utilized methods of autoethnography [84], self-supervision [118],

**Table 4: Drama therapy theory: performance-based drama therapy**

Sub-category	N (total)	N (per school)
Autobiographical	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 1</li> <li>NYU: 1</li> </ul>
Autoethnography	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 3</li> <li>NYU: 3</li> </ul>
Ethnodrama	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>K-State: 4</li> </ul>
Musical theater	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesley: 1</li> <li>NYU: 1</li> </ul>
Playback	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesley: 3</li> </ul>
Scriptwriting	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesley: 1</li> <li>NYU: 1</li> </ul>
Therapeutic theater	17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 6</li> <li>K-State: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 3</li> <li>NYU: 7</li> </ul>
Video/film	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 2</li> <li>NYU: 1</li> </ul>

Note: Theses may appear in more than one category or sub-category.

[122] as well as arts-based research [37], [59] to reflect on personal experiences of transference and countertransference from internships, placements or drama therapy training courses.

The category of performance-based drama therapy, defined here as drama therapy approaches or theories that centre both process and performance, included 41 total theses. Notably, all of the theses on ethnodrama [44], [128], [129], [130] came from Kansas State University and on Playback [131], [132], [133] from Lesley University. The most popular approach was therapeutic theater with 17 theses spread across all four schools represented.

## Intervention and integration focus

Theses and dissertations that fell outside of the other categorizations, but the research team felt should be highlighted due to the repetition of research topics, were placed into an intervention and integration focus category. Within this domain of investigation, two main categories were identified, integrated concepts, which combined drama therapy theory with another construct and intervention focus which focused on specific outcomes, theories, or frameworks used in the intervention design, each of which was further split into several sub-categories (see Table 5 and Table 6).

The category of integrated concepts contained theses that incorporated concepts from other fields or disciplines into the practice of drama therapy. It further contained six sub-categories: bondage discipline sadism masochism (BDSM), dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), humor, play therapy, spirituality and religion, and psychoeducation. The sub-category BDSM included two theses, one from Concordia [134] and one from NYU [135] both of which used drama therapy theory, specifically the core processes, in relation to BDSM. The two theses that fell under DBT, one from Lesley [78] and one from NYU [71], inte-

grated the theories of drama therapy and DBT. Humor included five theses submitted to Concordia, Lesley, and New York University. Theses within this sub-category all reviewed the concept of applying humor to drama therapy by developing novel interventions [61], [136], reviewing extant literature [124], [137] or via qualitative [61] and arts-based research [138]. The sub-category of play therapy contained three theses, each of which reviewed concepts of play therapy from a drama therapeutic perspective. Theses outlined similarities and differences via a literature review [139] as well as attempt to incorporate established forms of play therapy into drama therapy by developing novel intervention approaches [73], [140]. The sub-category of Psychoeducation was made up of four theses. By reflecting on clinical experiences [75], [106], reviewing extant literature [141] or developing novel approaches [50], these theses assessed how to incorporate methods of psychoeducation into drama therapeutic practice to comprehensively address issues of stress, trauma, and severe mental illness with a broad variety of clients. Lastly, the sub-category of Spirituality/Religion contained two theses that discussed the impact of religion on one's identity and examined its implications for the practice of drama therapy [47], [142].

The category of Intervention Focus contained theses that utilized drama therapy to achieve goals in the social and cultural realm outside of the traditional therapeutic space. It is further split into seven sub-categories: attachment, burnout, Covid-19, resilience, social-emotional learning, social justice, and stigma. The sub-category of attachment entailed three theses, which discussed, by reviewing literature or developing novel approaches, how different forms of drama therapy may help adolescents [73], [143] or unhoused individuals [144] work on unhealthy attachment patterns developed in childhood. Three theses were grouped within the sub-category of burnout. One thesis discussed how drama therapy may address the effects of long-lasting occupational stress and burnout in public

**Table 5: Integrated concepts**

Sub-category	N (total)	N (per school)
<b>BDSM</b>	2	• Concordia: 1 • NYU: 1
<b>DBT</b>	2	• Lesley: 1 • NYU: 1
<b>Humor</b>	5	• Concordia: 3 • Lesley: 1 • NYU: 1
<b>Play therapy</b>	3	• Concordia: 2 • Lesley: 1
<b>Psychoeducation</b>	4	• Lesley: 3 • NYU: 1
<b>Spirituality/religion</b>	2	• NYU: 2

Note: Theses may appear in more than one category or sub-category.

**Table 6: Intervention focus**

Sub-category	N (total)	N (per school)
<b>Attachment</b>	3	• Concordia: 1 • Lesley: 2
<b>Burnout</b>	3	• Lesley: 2 • NYU: 1
<b>Covid-19</b>	5	• Lesley: 3 • NYU: 2
<b>Resilience</b>	5	• Concordia: 2 • Lesley: 2 • NYU: 1
<b>Social justice</b>	26	• Concordia: 8 • K-State: 1 • Lesley: 5 • NYU: 12
<b>Social-emotional learning</b>	3	• Lesley: 2 • NYU: 1
<b>Stigma</b>	3	• Concordia: 1 • NYU: 2

Note: Theses may appear in more than one category or sub-category.

school teachers [141]. Additionally, two theses examined empirically how the constant exposure to trauma and severe mental health concerns for mental health care workers generally may lead to higher rates of vicarious trauma and burnout in this population [43], [145]. The five theses focused on Covid-19, three from Lesley and two from NYU, varied in approach, but focused on helping different populations during the pandemic, including theater artists [49], [146], the Jewish community [147], students on the autism spectrum [148], and Chinese international students [98].

The sub-category of resilience included five theses of empirical and theoretical research discussing how drama therapy may strengthen resiliency in adults [136], adolescents [42], [149] and children [52], [140]. The sub-category of social-emotional learning contained three theses, which discussed the potential of drama therapy, particularly methods of improvisations and play, in promoting social-emotional skills in children and adolescents [53], [148], [150].

The sub-category of social justice, the largest sub-category within the category intervention focus, contained 26 theses. Theses in this sub-category emphasize the potential social and cultural impact of drama therapy as well as the importance of social and cultural forces on the practice of drama therapy. Theses outlined on a theoretical, practical, and empirical level provide important contextual factors in working with marginalized or oppressed populations, such as BIPOC populations [81], [90], [102], [151], [152], [153], the LGBTQIA+/Queer community [74], [86], [92], [110] or disabled clients [154], [155] as well as the importance of cultural competency for creative arts therapists [38], [65], [97], [122], [156]. Additionally, a number of theses within this category discussed how drama therapy may aid in creating a more equitable and just society outside the clinical realm [63], [64], [69], [119], [157], [158], [159], [160]. The sub-category of Stigma included three theses, which described how performance may be used to address personally felt or culturally performed stigmas surrounding

sexual identities [161], eating disorders [162] or other mental health diagnoses [84].

## Population

The main populations centered by the students' theses contained fourteen categories: adults, BIPOC populations, children and adolescents, disabled populations, drama therapists-in-training, incarcerated populations, migrant/immigrant populations, older adults, professionals, LGBTQIA+/Queer populations, students, theatre artists, those who experienced trauma, and young adults (Table 7).

**Table 7: Populations**

Sub-category	N (total)	N (per school)
<b>Adults</b>	20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 4</li> <li>Lesley: 11</li> <li>NYU: 5</li> </ul>
<b>BIPOC populations</b>	20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 3</li> <li>K-State: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 3</li> <li>NYU: 13</li> </ul>
<b>Children and adolescents</b>	29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 7</li> <li>K-State: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 16</li> <li>NYU: 5</li> </ul>
<b>Disability</b>	28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 5</li> <li>K-State: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 12</li> <li>NYU: 10</li> </ul>
<b>Drama therapist-in-training</b>	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 5</li> <li>Lesley: 1</li> <li>NYU: 7</li> </ul>
<b>Incarcerated populations</b>	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesley: 1</li> <li>NYU: 2</li> </ul>
<b>LGBTQIA+/queer populations</b>	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 3</li> <li>K-State: 1</li> <li>Lesley: 5</li> <li>NYU: 4</li> </ul>
<b>Migrant/immigrant populations</b>	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesley: 1</li> <li>NYU: 3</li> </ul>
<b>Older adults</b>	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 2</li> <li>Lesley: 1</li> <li>NYU: 3</li> </ul>
<b>Professional populations</b>	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 2</li> <li>Lesley: 6</li> <li>NYU: 5</li> </ul>
<b>Student populations</b>	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesley: 8</li> <li>NYU: 2</li> </ul>
<b>Theatre artists</b>	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesley: 3</li> <li>NYU: 3</li> </ul>
<b>Trauma experiences</b>	34	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concordia: 4</li> <li>K-State: 3</li> <li>Lesley: 15</li> <li>NYU: 12</li> </ul>
<b>Young adult population</b>	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesley: 1</li> <li>NYU: 2</li> </ul>

Note: Theses may appear in more than one category or sub-category.

The category of adults included theses that focused on adult populations, including queer and transgender adults [68], [72], [99], [161], adults in clinical settings [80], [87], and in community settings [163], [164]. The category of BIPOC populations contained theses describing drama therapy in application with diverse populations of color [46], [48], [81], [85], [98], [102], [119], [132], [165], [166], [167], [168], or reflections on cultural responsibility and humility in drama therapy when working with BIPOC clients [38], [90], [122], [151], [152], [153], [159], [169].

The category of children and adolescents contained theses detailing school-based drama therapy [35], [42], [67], [79], [148], [150], [157], [170], working with children and adolescents in clinical settings [96], [111], [171], or drama therapy theory and model development targeting children and adolescents [53], [73], [76], [94], [97], [140], [172], [173].

The category of disability (see Figure 6) contained 28 theses that were further divided into the subcategories of various (i.e., theses written on a variety of different disabilities); chronic illness, intellectual and developmental disability, and mental illness. The latter sub-category of mental illness was the most researched with seventeen theses, some of which focused specifically on Eating Disorders [96], [107], [142], [162], schizophrenia [40], [41], [44], [108] or addiction [80].

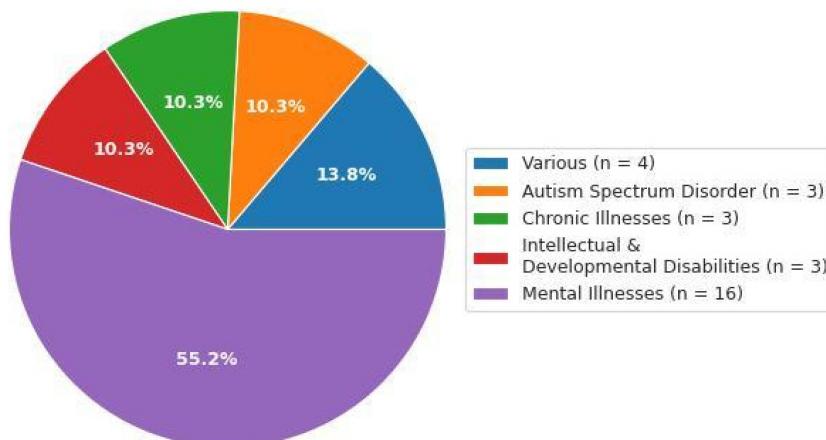
The category of drama therapist-in-training contained 13 theses. Students utilized research methods such as autoethnography or heuristic inquiry to empirically assess their own experiences in their drama therapy training [37], [116], [117], [123], [156], [169], [174], [175], [176], or described processes of their supervision during internship placements [59], [82], [115], [118].

The category of incarcerated populations included three theses including literature reviews of the use of theater in prisons [158] and drama therapy with incarcerated youth [177], as well as using queer theory, role theory, and DvT in a forensic psychiatric unit [86].

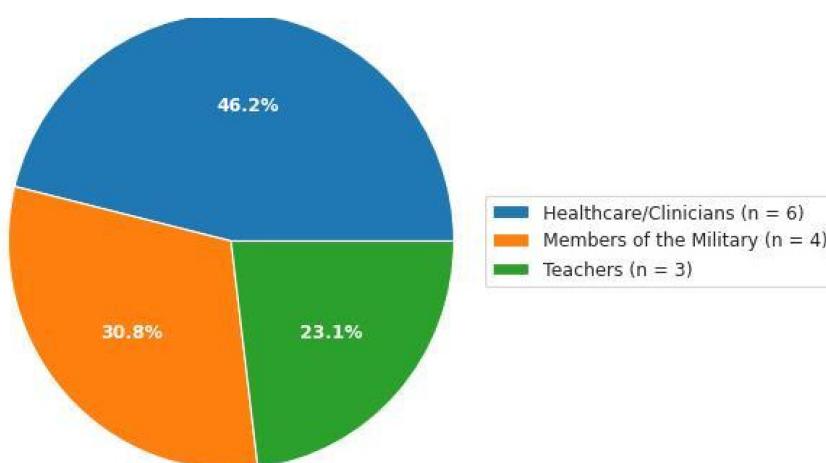
The category of LGBTQIA+/queer populations contained twelve theses, which described drama therapy in application with queer adults [68], [92], [99], [161] and adolescents [74], [91], [110] or the extension of drama therapeutic practice to be more inclusive toward members of the LGBTQIA+ community [47], [72], [101], [178], [179]. The category of migrant/immigrant populations contained four theses, describing the personal and cultural impacts of the immigration process and what role drama therapy may have for these populations [51], [85], [169], [180].

The category of older adults describes drama therapy in application with the elderly [61], [62], [181]. Some theses within this category focused in particular on patients with Alzheimer's or dementia [182], [183], [184].

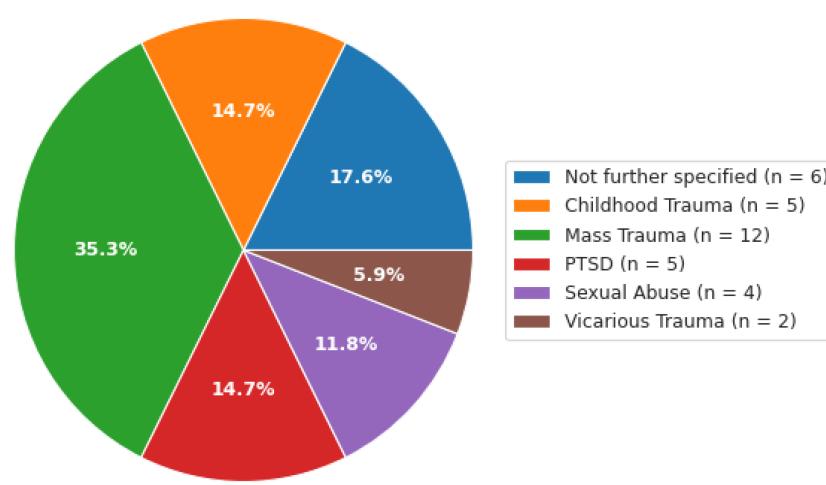
The category of professional populations (see Figure 7) included twelve theses, which detailed the application of drama therapy with healthcare professionals [50], [185], including other creative arts therapists [84], [125], [145], [186], members of the military [58], [83], [187], [188] as well as teachers [141], [189], [190].

*Sub-categories of Disability*

Note: n=9

**Figure 6: Sub-categories of disability**

Note: n=13

**Figure 7: Sub-categories of professional populations**

Note: n=34

**Figure 8: Sub-categories of trauma experiences**

The category of student populations included 10 theses, which were written either with an emphasis on students in primary and secondary education [42], [79], [148], [157] or students in university or college [35], [58], [112], [132], [146], [172].

The category of theatre artists contained six theses, which examined drama therapy practice in rehearsal processes [49], [69], [193] or actor training programs [146], [191], [192].

The category of trauma (see Figure 8) included 34 theses that were further divided into the subcategories of childhood trauma [32], [33], [128], [144], [150], PTSD [35], [52], [75], [83], [187], sexual abuse [32], [128], [130], [193], vicarious trauma [50], [145] and mass trauma [35], [165], [194], [195]. Notably, eight of the 12 theses included in the sub-category mass trauma were on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic [49], [98], [131], [146], [147], [148], [151], [196].

Lastly, the category of young adult populations included three theses which examined using drama therapy with Cancer Survivors [55], expanding the window of tolerance with young adults with eating disorders [106], and working with Chinese International Students in the U.S. [97].

## Setting

Another lens through which student research was examined was settings. Four main categories were identified: clinical settings, community settings, incarceration settings, and schools. Theses that dealt generally with theory or model development and were not rooted in a specific setting were not included in this domain of investigation (Table 8).

**Table 8: Settings**

Sub-category	N (total)	N (per school)
Clinical setting	30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concordia: 4</li> <li>• Lesley: 18</li> <li>• NYU: 8</li> </ul>
Community setting	17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concordia: 3</li> <li>• K-State: 1</li> <li>• Lesley: 9</li> <li>• NYU: 4</li> </ul>
Incarceration setting	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lesley: 1</li> <li>• NYU: 2</li> </ul>
Schools	20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concordia: 2</li> <li>• Lesley: 9</li> <li>• NYU: 9</li> </ul>

The categories of clinical setting (see Figure 9) was further divided into the settings of psychiatric hospitals [34], [43], [77], [78], [87] medical hospitals [67], [170], residential facilities [61], [62], [96], [122], [133], [181], [182], and outpatient services [32], [39], [40], [41], [54], [57], [75], [76], [80], [83], [92], [99], [106], [107], [153], [171].

Community settings were defined as any setting where drama therapy occurred beyond formalized environments

such as clinical environments, educational, or incarceration settings. Theses within this category described empirical, theoretical, or practical community engagement projects [44], [48], [50], [66], [97], [114], [117], [145], [161], [163], [176], [147] or therapeutic theatre productions [70], [154], [159], [164], [197]. Incarceration settings contained three theses that focused on drama therapy in forensic settings [86] and detention facilities [158], [177]. School settings were subcategorized into primary and secondary [35], [42], [79], [116], [119], [141], [150], [157], [172], [189], [190] and college education [58], [116], [131], [169], [175], [146], [198], [199], [160]. [86].

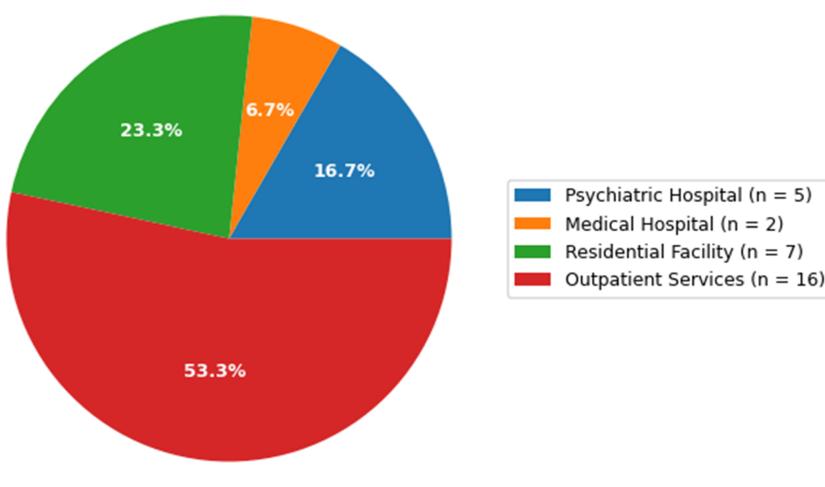
## Discussion

The current research study aimed to elucidate what students of drama therapy examine in their master theses or dissertations. Via a narrative review, researchers aggregated, sorted, and categorized 192 theses and dissertations submitted to four different schools of drama therapy along the domains of utilized research method, drama therapy theory, intervention and integration focus, population, and setting. In sum, it offers a comprehensive overview of student research in drama therapy in North America from the years 2017–2022. As summarized in this analysis, students' theses cover a diverse range of topics utilizing theoretical, practical, and empirical approaches. Furthermore, it is evident that students base their work on existing theories and practical approaches within the field of drama therapy, but also expand the field by connecting to constructs and paradigms outside of drama therapy and exploring novel interventions and applications of drama therapy. However, this research also identified a lack of standardization within drama therapy education as a whole [1].

## Diversity of student research

The diversity within the assessed theses is evident in the range of populations, settings, concepts, and theories examined in the students' research. Overall, this research identified populations across fourteen categories, settings across four categories, as well as theories and concepts within drama therapy and outside the field of drama therapy across eight and 13 categories, respectively. Furthermore, as evidenced in the examination of research methods, there is an emphasis within student research to develop new methods or propose novel applications for drama therapy. As such, this diversity found within the students' research has the potential to enrich the field of drama therapy.

Though students at some schools need to follow a specific thesis structure, for example at Lesley University students currently have the option to focus on an intervention at their internship site, a literature review, or a community project, and though some students topics are likely influenced by professors at individual schools, overall students



Note: n=30

**Figure 9: Sub-categories of clinical settings**

have freedom to choose their topic. This differs in some programs, where the topic of choice is a reflection of faculty interest and grant funding. In North America, in the field of drama therapy, funding is generally not provided for student research, and student theses research is not tied to faculty research. This provides both benefits and hindrances to North American students: they are able to follow their interests in both research approach and topic, resulting in more diverse and creative student research, but they do not have the financial support or a higher level of faculty collaboration, resulting in fewer resources and smaller projects with which to engage. In sum, the overviewed drama therapy programs grant more freedom of choice than imposing pressure in a certain direction for choosing a thesis topic. This set up puts students in the role of a ‘researcher’, rather than the role of a ‘research assistant’, with respect to their theses, resulting in both advantages and disadvantages for the student.

The idiosyncratic nature of students’ theses is also evident in the spread of unique keywords. Around 70% of keywords that were generated or adapted by the research team were only applied to a single thesis. Consequently, while overall this research identified common research interests across students and schools, this demonstrates that a majority of theses were also unique in their own right, examining areas of research that no other thesis had. These results mirror results found in a recent bibliometric assessment of the field at large [14], indicating that this diversity of concepts, approaches and ideas might be inherent to the field of drama therapy.

## Expanding the field of drama therapy

Common themes prevalent in the surveyed body of student work mirror recent empirical research in the overall drama therapy literature, such as school-based interventions [200], [201] or developmental transformations [202], [203], [204], [205], [206] indicating that students are engaging with the extant knowledge base of drama

therapy in their academic practice. Most striking in this regard is students’ research into the core processes of drama therapy, which, although first defined by Jones [207] over 30 years ago, has only recently, in the last ten years, begun to attract wider attention in the scholarly community of drama therapy [12], [208], [209], [210]. Yet, during the surveyed years 2017 to 2022 already 18 students focused their thesis on the core processes, indicating the potential student research may have in contributing to and elevating the scholarly discourse within drama therapy.

Furthermore, this study identified a prominent trend within the students’ work not only to engage with the body of knowledge of drama therapy but also to expand upon it. Students showcased the application of drama therapy techniques in novel settings and with seldom-heard populations as well as intentionally integrated theories, methods and concepts from outside the field into drama therapeutic practice. Additionally, students added to extant drama therapy theories and methods, such as developmental transformations [89] or role theory (i.e., Black American role taxonomy; [102], [211]) in order to expand their theoretical base or practical applications.

In extension, this study identified directions within student research across schools that are not yet evident in the broader scholarly discourse on drama therapy. For example, four students from different universities focused their thesis on the integration of tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* [212], indicating a nascent interest in the topic among students that thus far remains to be explored in the broader drama therapy literature [45], [103], [104], [105]. Similarly, the use of humor and the application of stand-up comedy is explored by five students from three universities [61], [124], [136], [137], [138]. Although the concepts of playfulness and entertainment are integral elements of drama therapy [213], [214], [215], the specific focus addressed by the student researchers remains absent from the literature thus far. As a result, student researchers as well as the

student research database may inspire new directions within drama therapy literature and practice. Moreover, as evident in the large number of theses centering on issues of social justice or the social and cultural effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, students demonstrated a keen focus on the application of drama therapeutic practice outside the traditional clinical context. Students from all four schools submitted theses that incorporated a social justice framework, accounting for 14% of all theses. This turn toward cultural and social issues is also evident in the variety of populations featured in the students' work, demonstrating that students are interested in making drama therapeutic practice more inclusive, particularly focusing on traditionally marginalized communities. Such a shift away from the therapeutic, clinical realm is also evident in the field as a whole [216]. Sajnani et al. [217], for example, described the necessity for drama therapists as well as drama therapy pedagogy to engage with social and cultural issues in order to address mental health concerns comprehensively, rather than from a purely clinical perspective. Consequently, cultural humility and responsibility are declared key competencies in drama therapy [1] and drama therapy education [217], [218].

## Differences across schools

Furthermore, one salient aspect identified in this study was the differences in students' theses both in foci and approach across the surveyed schools. The analysis of research conducted at Concordia, New York, and Lesley University, for example, demonstrated that the students' chosen research methods varied significantly across schools. Similarly, 32% of theses submitted to Concordia University and 18% of theses from New York University centered on processes of self-reflexivity, whereas none of the theses submitted to Lesley or Kansas State University showed the same focus. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the drama therapy methods of role method/role theory and developmental transformations are particularly prevalent in theses submitted to Lesley and New York University and less discussed in theses submitted to Concordia University. These differences, evident in this analysis, may be directly related to the variance in education and pedagogical approaches between schools and highlight the potential utility of a shared framework of educational competencies to further unify the field and education of drama therapy [1].

Lastly, an important question to consider within this conversation is the role students, professors, and academic programs ascribe to student research. While first and foremost the purpose of a thesis is the educational benefit for the student, student research may also, as evidenced in this analysis, advance, and enrich the field as a whole. However, thus far, student research has remained limited in its scholarly impact due to a lack of engagement with student research outside of the collegiate setting. To this point, it is noteworthy that a number of students have published their thesis in peer-reviewed

academic journals and thus entered their ideas regarding the advancement of the field on issues surrounding drama therapeutic practice [204], [219], [220], [221], and social justice and inclusivity [210], [222], [223] into the broader scholarly discourse.

## Limitations

While this project aims to provide a comprehensive overview of work produced by students in NADTA accredited, academic drama therapy courses, there are limitations to this research. First, it is important to note that the work identified is only what could be accessed by the researchers at this time. The researchers utilized only the data that could be procured either through a public online repository, as was the case with Lesley University and Concordia University, or that were provided access via the school, as with New York University and Kansas State University. Further, this study looked only at student theses and dissertations, excluding other forms of student research projects that may exist in NADTA-accredited, academic courses.

This paper focuses on the theses provided by four of the six accredited drama therapy programs. Additionally, Kansas State had markedly fewer theses included than Concordia, Lesley, or NYU. It is important to note that the exclusion of so much student work is not a reflection on the value of that work. Many CIIS students produce self-revelatory performances for their culminating project, and that work is no less valuable to the field than a literature review or empirical research. Drama therapy is an embodied experiential practice, and it is valid for a master's project to direct students to do their own embodied experiential work. The addition of papers discussing student self-revs would certainly enrich this research and the spreadsheet of student research.

As noted in the bibliometric overview, some student work did not include keywords. In those cases, the researchers generated keywords based on the student's work. There exists some limitation in the researchers' assumption made when identifying these keywords. Beyond incomplete information related to keywords, another limitation of this study was additional incomplete information. Some student research, for example, did not provide a thorough abstract, which may have diluted its categorization during the narrative review process. The researchers also wish to acknowledge that only schools in North America were considered in this study, in keeping with our inclusion criteria. Therefore, this project can only offer insights from a North American perspective of drama therapy student research and does not represent drama therapy student work in other parts of the world. Lastly, alternative-track student research was excluded entirely from this work per our exclusion criteria as there is currently no systematic way to contact and gather AT students' previous master's research.

## Implications for research education and practice

Through a commitment to help understand and organize drama therapy student literature in the field, the NADTA student research committee engaged in a research process which resulted in the student thesis database which serves as a central space to access categorized student theses. The project aims to elevate student research by increasing visibility to the work, and to help better understand what students in accredited academic drama therapy schools write about in their theses and dissertations. The examined data led to five categories which dictated the organization of the spreadsheet. The database highlights the diverse perspectives and topics in student research. The research team also hopes that former students will use the database as a bridge between schools to connect with those who are investigating similar topics and to pursue research post-graduation, thereby shifting the narrative of student theses from an endpoint to an entrance into the researcher role. The spreadsheet will continue as an active document, to be accessed on the NADTA website [2], that is continually updated to include more work, and the student research subcommittee hopes to include all six universities offering drama therapy degrees. Students and graduates whose work is not already included, are invited to submit their thesis via a link on the spreadsheet.

Overall, this study and the resulting database supports the trajectory of research growth within drama therapy by expanding our understanding of student theses and how they may shape the future of our field. As the database presents the research of emerging drama therapists and their empirical and theoretical work, it sheds light on the direction the field as a whole in North America may take, as it moves forward. The NADTA student research committee recommends students connect post-graduation to expand on their work, as well as publish and present their research at conferences and aims to host forums that facilitate such connections.

## Notes

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

### Authors' note

This study's bibliometric data and analysis are made publicly accessible via the online repository figshare [30], [31]. Portions of these findings were presented at the 2022 NADTA conference in San Diego and the 2023 International Dramatherapy Conference in Amersfoort (NL).

## Acknowledgement

Thank you to our student research subcommittee, many of whom are authors in this study, who helped to shepherd this project forward. Thank you to Dr. Jason Frydman who was the first reader of this paper and provided important insight and sources into the narrative review method.

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