

Literature Review: Social-Emotional Learning in Educational Drama

Laura DeGraff, Department of Elementary Education, University of Alberta, Canada

Abstract: Increasing complexity in classroom academic achievement and behaviour supports has led teachers to search for meaningful, effective strategies for improving students' social-emotional development. Many see educational drama as a natural fit for this type of programming, but care must be taken before widespread policy changes are implemented. This narrative literature review defines what social-emotional development and educational drama are and investigates the current research that connects the two. Through analysis of the research methodology, program design, and data generated, this study explored a wealth of positive impacts in a variety of contexts and indicated several important, practical implications for wide-spread policy changes. Suggestions for potential further research is also included.

Keywords: Arts Education, Creative Drama, Drama Education, Social Emotional Learning, Social Skills

Introduction

It is a tagline on a poster and a graphic on a Facebook meme, but the famous quotation actually began with author Robert Fulghum (2004): “All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten” (p. 2). In his essay, he lists many of life’s important lessons— some quaint and some startlingly profound— but an important theme can be drawn from many of the items on his list: that of social-emotional learning.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) aims to give students the capacity to regulate emotions, make and maintain friendships, develop empathy, and make good decisions (Committee for Children, 2016). These capabilities provide students with tools for success not only in the classroom, but on the playground, with their families, and in life beyond K-12 schooling. In our post-COVID world where children have missed key years of social development with their peers, this type of learning is an especially relevant topic (CBC News, 2022). Educators should be just as mindful of these concerns as they are of reading and math learning loss. Intentional social-emotional learning programs will also help students to counteract other current stressors such as sensory overload, increased violence in media, and intensification of academic pressures (Brouillette, 2010). Stakeholders have many ideas of how to support students’ social-emotional learning, but time is always a limiting factor in schools. Interventions to support SEL need to be effective and worthwhile, and educational drama has been highlighted by experts as an excellent fit (Broach et al., 2016).

In this context, educational drama differs from drama therapy, in which there are therapeutic goals that are client-specific (North American Drama Therapy Association, 2021). Educational drama is also different from performance-based programs such as producing a school musical. Rather than focusing on the final product of a performance, the purpose of educational drama is to teach students the foundation of dramatic arts . Students play games, work together, and communicate. They learn how to structure a story and how to portray an emotion or a character. Any performance or showcase of learning is created collaboratively among participants rather than with a set script and a teacher as the director. Actor training is already focused in areas such as portraying and recognizing emotions, developing non-verbal communication, and learning to work as a team. Müller et. al’s (2017) ArtAbility experience outlines an excellent example of this type of programming. All of these skills tie closely to social-emotional learning, so it is a natural fit for teachers to use these with their students (Guli et al., 2013).

In my experience, drama educators are mindful of the social-emotional benefits of drama programming. It is a common topic of discussion during professional collaboration, and something that many of my colleagues will share with parents, students, and other stakeholders when promoting their program. Brouillette (2010) also demonstrates that many teachers recognize the benefits of arts instruction. The Alberta Drama Program of Studies (Alberta Education, 1985) already included areas such as growing in self-confidence, understanding emotions, and respecting others. All of these fit perfectly within SEL goals. What is taken as a given by specialist teachers is not always known by all, however, and it is not always supported by present-day academic conversations. This has driven me to investigate the current research in order to determine how educational drama might support students’ social-emotional learning.

Methods

In this narrative literature review, I began locating relevant sources by searching for articles through EBSCO, Australian Education Index, CBCA: Social Sciences (Canadian Business and Current Affairs), Education database and ERIC. The key terms I used were *social skills* and *social emotional*. There is a plethora of modifiers used to describe this type of development, so it was important to keep the terms broad. I cross searched these terms with *drama education*, *theatre education*, and *dramatic play* in order to limit the search results to educational, process-based activities rather than performance-based programs. While there was an initial search term of *elementary students* and *primary students*, this was later removed to broaden the results. There were no filters on country or year of publication, although studies that were more recent were prioritized while sorting through results. Eighteen relevant articles were found in the initial search. From there, I used backwards chaining to find more literature and made the selection of studies based on the following criteria: those that were within the last fifteen years, those that generated sufficient data, and those that included a sample size of at least ten participants. The purpose of this review was to gain an understanding of how educational drama might help students' social-emotional learning, I also aimed to include studies with diverse intervention models. In the end, fifteen articles were included in this review.

Findings

Through review of the literature chosen, I discovered many important findings. In order to put these findings into context, I included a brief explanation of methodological approaches. I have also provided a summary of the program structures that scholars chose to implement and study. The results of the research will first be discussed as a whole and then broken into three distinct categories exploring the skills that the students gained.

Methodological Approaches

Studies showed a range of methodological approaches, often combining quantitative questionnaires and assessments with interviews of participants or observations of lessons in action. Several featured a quasi-experimental design with a control group and an experimental group (Ceylan & Gök Çolak, 2019; Freeman et al., 2003; Guli et al., 2013; Şenol & Metin, 2021). While some researchers chose to select a broad sample from a particular age group, others chose to focus specifically on inclusive education contexts, especially with students diagnosed with autism (Guli et al., 2013; Şenol & Metin, 2021; Stratou et al., 2023). In the case of Broach et al. (2016), students who participated in their study were identified as at risk for violence. A wide variety of data collection methods were used, and a comprehensive table is included in Appendix A.

Program Structures

There were many different ways that researchers structured their work. Some chose to observe and collect data on programs that were already operational (Brouillette, 2010; Gallagher, 2018; Gattenhof, 2012; Malm & Löfgren, 2007; Müller et al., 2017). Others created intervention programs in a specific context to measure that effectiveness (Broach et al., 2016; Ceylan & Gök Çolak, 2019; Joronen et al., 2011; Freeman et al., 2003). There were several projects where the facilitators were trained artists and researchers (Broach et al., 2016; Ceylan & Gök Çolak, 2019; Guli et al., 2013; Korošec & Zorec, 2020; Şenol & Metin, 2021; Stratou et al., 2023). Conversely, other projects chose to measure a program's effectiveness where non-specialist classroom teachers were the ones teaching the lessons (Brouillette, 2010; Gattenhof, 2012; Joronen et al., 2011). Peterson and Horton (2019) were unique in having Indigenous Elders coming in to share knowledge with the students. Afterwards, the regular classroom teachers provided materials to encourage dramatic play that explored the concepts that the Elders taught such as making tea or jam in accordance with cultural traditions. All programs had students participating in the sessions on a regular or semi-regular basis, although the length of the experiences and the amount of time for each session varied widely. For example, Broach et al.'s (2016) program had only five sessions with a performance at the end, while Korošec & Zorec (2020) had teachers use puppets with their preschool students daily over the span of three months.

Program Results

The vast majority of studies showed that educational drama programs improved students' social-emotional learning. Students in the experimental group showed a statistically significant improvement in target areas, and qualitative

interviews resulted in an abundance of positive perspectives. Out of the literature reviewed, only the study of Freeman et al. (2003) showed no significant change. In this case, the intervention lasted for eighteen weeks, and students received forty minutes of instruction once a week, which is more direct instruction than in many other examples (Broach et al., 2016; Brouillette, 2010; Ceylan & Gök Çolak, 2019; Guli et al., 2013; Joronen et al., 2011; Şenol & Metin, 2021). One explanation may be that Freeman et al.'s (2003) study is the only example where SEL goals were not explicitly stated to the vast majority of participants. Students and classroom teachers were all unaware of the goals, and only some of the instructors who implemented the program were informed of the purpose of the study.

Goals and results for each experience were communicated using various terms and measured with different tools including the Behavioral Assessment System for Children (Guli et al., 2013), the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire for Youth at Risk (Broach et al., 2016), and the Preschool Life Skills Scale (Ceylan & Gök Çolak, 2019). Qualitative methods resulted in a broad set of data depending on the specific goals of the researchers, and interviews were a very common method.

While the diversity makes it challenging to replicate successes, the research findings in the publications that I explored demonstrated that educational drama can work in a variety of contexts and in many different models. Intervention can be successful with a targeted group of students in a specialized program such as in Broach et al.'s (2016) program or in Guli et al.'s (2013) study. At the same time, positive results also took place when researchers brought in an entire class at once as participants (Joronen et al., 2011; Peterson & Horton, 2019). There is opportunity to adjust a program to best fit the needs of the group and the cultural context. Overall, the positive results showed students' increased competencies in at least one of three areas: communication skills, collaboration skills, and improved sense of self.

Communication Skills. Educational drama provided students the opportunity to improve their communication skills in several ways. In Guli et al.'s (2013) study, youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or a Nonverbal Learning Disability showed improvement in nonverbal communication, both in the quantitative measures of the study and in the qualitative interviews. Brouillette (2010) found that teachers perceived students to have healthier social scripts as a result of drama programs. The ten to twelve-year-old participants in Joronen et al.'s (2011) study were better able to communicate with their teachers, their parents, and their peers. Through their research, the authors observed non-verbal communication, mutual conversations, and humour. High school-aged participants in Gallagher's (2018) qualitative research reflected that their experience in the drama program allowed them to better assert themselves and handle conflicts. Gattenhof's (2012) Yonder project focused on lower elementary-aged participants, and the program showed an increase in students' oracy and literacy.

Collaboration Skills. Educational drama programs also provide a fertile ground for better collaboration skills. Students in Joronen et al.'s (2011) research improved their empathy and emotional regulation by constructing and acting in stories told from perspectives that were not their own. The DRACON project (combining drama and conflict) helped participants handle social issues with their peers more effectively (Malm & Löfgren, 2007; O'Toole & Burton, 2012). Both the neurotypical high school-aged mentors and the middle school participants with autism developed strong relationships as they worked towards a goal together (Müller et al., 2017). The experimental group in Şenol and Metin's (2021) research showed statistically significant improvements in cooperation, collaboration, and sharing through their scores on the Interaction Rating Scale of Children and the Collaborative-Cooperation-Sharing Behaviors of Children. Stratou et al. (2023) demonstrated similar results in positive social behaviour, as well as a decrease in behaviour problems through use of the Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire. Similarly, preschool participants in Korošec & Zorec's (2020) research had fewer instances of aggressive behaviour such as yelling and fighting after implementation of a puppetry program.

Sense of Self. The arts are known for providing opportunities for self-expression and in the case of educational drama, the literature supports that assumption. Many of the researchers found a common theme in interviews where students shared growth in their confidence, self-esteem, and self-concept (Broach et al., 2016; Gallagher, 2018; Gattenhof, 2012). Indigenous students in Peterson and Horton's (2019) work were able to bring Ojibway ways of knowing into their dramatic play, thereby strengthening their sense of identity. In the ArtAbility program, middle school students with autism learned how to confidently take their place in a performance (Müller et al., 2017). Interviews in this study also showed that the neurotypical high school mentors learned new things about themselves and developed new skills.

Implications

There are several elements that need to be in place for drama education programs to effectively improve students' social-emotional learning. The most important is that program facilitators need to have the proper training and background knowledge to implement the program. Qualified artists and educators may be brought in, or teachers may be given professional development in this area (Brouillette, 2010; Gattenhof, 2012; Guli et al., 2013; Korošec & Zorec, 2020; Stratou et al., 2023). Although teachers may abstractly understand drama education as a good thing, setting aside regular, meaningful time for it is a challenge (O'Toole & Burton, 2012). Robust training and resources would be helpful for teachers who do not specialize in drama and may encourage them to take new, creative risks. If teachers are not trained, they will not understand the intervention, and they will be less likely to use educational drama at all (Carter, 2014).

Another important element is for students to have a say in the work that is done. The drama program should emphasize process over product, whether through allowing students to build their own dramatic play, deciding the type of learning they are engaged in, or using performer-created models such as Forum Theatre (Broach et al., 2016; Gattenhof, 2012; O'Toole & Burton, 2005; Peterson & Horton, 2019). If policymakers decide to implement educational drama to improve SEL, they must refrain from the temptation to push for a structured, formal performance piece that is often upheld as the marker for a drama program's success.

Additionally, teachers and facilitators need to be aware that SEL is a goal of whatever program they are implementing. Freeman et al. (2003) showed no statistically significant change in their study where students and most facilitators were unaware of the goal. A clear understanding of the aims of whichever program is being implemented will allow teachers to make professional decisions in support of that objective. Also, informing students of the purpose of their own learning is a more responsible and ethical practice.

Many studies featured students and teachers who chose to participate in drama activities, or who already had an interest in them (Broach et al., 2016; Brouillette, 2010; Gallagher, 2018; Joronen et al., 2011). In elementary classrooms, this is not always the case since students do not have electives to choose from. Studies that featured entire classrooms of students were often focused on early learning contexts where participant engagement is usually easier to achieve (Ceylan & Gök Çolak, 2019; Korošec & Zorec, 2020, Peterson & Horton, 2019; Şenol & Metin, 2021). Teachers as well are often assigned classes or programs without having an active interest in them. Any educational drama program that is implemented should allow as much voice and choice from participants and facilitators as possible, especially as students get older.

These implications present a challenge for my own teaching context. Very few of my colleagues have training or experience in drama, especially outside of performance-centered programs. The importance of training to develop a body of professional knowledge is clearly laid out in the current research, but it is challenging to give time and attention to this training in the busy reality of present-day schools. Resources must also be given to educate students, parents, and community stakeholders alike as to the purpose and benefits of educational drama. I have personally experienced these time constraints and external pressures in my own teaching practice. It often feels impossible to make time for every experience that would be helpful for my students, and I am constantly needing to refocus, reprioritize, and be selective. The research on social-emotional benefits in educational drama is very clear, however, and it is important to implement programs such as these properly and as best as circumstances allow.

Limitations and Further Study

As stated above, most of the literature features students who choose to take drama classes and teachers who already have training (or who are at the very least interested) in arts education. Students who demonstrated aggression, conduct disorders, or intellectual disabilities were also purposefully excluded from several of the studies (Guli et al., 2013; Şenol & Metin, 2021; Stratou et al., 2023). While Müller et al. (2017) were less selective in their criteria, further research should be done on how these programs can be implemented with students of all ability and interest levels seeing as Canadian schools serve a diverse population. Additionally, research could be done that features teacher perspectives who have not had training or experience in the arts.

Gallagher (2018) as well as Peterson and Horton (2019) were unfortunately the only studies taking place in Canada. Guli et al. (2013) have found that cultural context has a large impact on the effectiveness of drama programs, and the unique culture of Canadian schools creates unique programming needs that should be researched. Peterson and Horton's (2019) experience in Northern Canada also shows how culture can differ vastly even in the same country.

All studies that featured a control group compared one type of intervention program against no intervention at all. The results are clear that educational drama is an effective intervention for SEL, but further research will need to be done to determine if certain programs or methods are more effective than others and if those programs are dependent on a specific classroom context.

Conclusion

In the review of the literature, there is clear evidence that educational drama has a place in promoting social-emotional learning. Educational drama helps students develop communication and collaboration skills as well as a greater sense of self as they work through different activities and exercises. A wide variety of structures and programs all show a positive result for an equally wide variety of students.

There are, however, some considerations that should be taken for a wider implementation of these programs. Not every student will be interested in participating in such activities, and not every teacher will have the background and training necessary to execute these programs. Social-emotional development does not happen automatically in every educational drama lesson, and therefore it must be a focus during the planning and delivery process. As with any educational activity, students and teachers need support to develop a program that meets the unique needs of the context. After all, if the goal is to develop our students' social-emotional skills, then we need to exercise our own social-emotional skills and respect the uniqueness our students bring into the classroom.

REFERENCES

- Alberta Education. (1985). *The program of studies for drama*. Government of Alberta. <https://education.alberta.ca/media/482115/elemdram.pdf>
- Broach, E., Pugh, S., & Smith, C. (2016). Expressive alternatives: Facilitating social and emotional learning through an expressive arts curriculum. *Annual in Therapeutic Recreation*, 23, 41–51.
- Brouillette, L. (2010). How the arts help children to create healthy social scripts: Exploring the perceptions of elementary teachers. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 111(1), 16–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632910903228116>
- Carter, M. R. (2014). Drama and theatre education in Canada: A snapshot. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 49(1), 237–245. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1025780ar>
- CBC News. (2022, June 17). *Addressing the pandemic's impact on kids' social skills* [Video]. Youtube. <https://youtu.be/fKkULRfNiRI?si=67IN9V2aBmgUCHJf>
- Ceylan, R., & Gök Çolak, F. (2019). The effect of drama activities on the life skills of five-year-old children. *International Education Studies*, 12(8), 46–58. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v12n8p46>
- Committee for Children. (2016, August 1). *Social-emotional learning: What is SEL and why SEL matters* [Video]. Youtube. <https://youtu.be/ikehX9o1JbI?si=UfJyjQqmt0l48wtP>
- Freeman, G. D., Sullivan, K., & Fulton, C. R. (2003). Effects of creative drama on self-concept, social skills, and problem behavior. *Journal of Educational Research*, 96(3), 131–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220670309598801>
- Fulghum, R. (2004). *All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten: Uncommon thoughts on common things*. Ballantine Books.
- Gallagher, K. (2018). Reconsideration of social innovation: Drama pedagogies and youth perspectives on creative and social relations in Canadian schooling. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'Éducation*, 41(1), 1–23.
- Gattenhof, S. (2012). The yonder project: Literacy and social competency development in primary school students through co-creation of live performance. *NJ Drama Australia Journal*, 36(1), 50–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14452294.2012.11649554>
- Guli, L. A., Semrud-Clikeman, M., Lerner, M. D., & Britton, N. (2013). Social competence intervention program (SCIP): A pilot study of a creative drama program for youth with social difficulties. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 40(1), 37–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2012.09.002>
- Joronen, K., Häkämies, A., & Åstedt, K. P. (2011). Children's experiences of a drama programme in social and emotional learning. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 25(4), 671–678. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6712.2011.00877.x>
- Korošec, H., & Zorec, M. B. (2020). The impact of creative drama activities on aggressive behaviour of preschool children. *Research in Education*, 108(1), 62–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034523719858219>
- Malm, B., & Löfgren, H. (2007). Empowering students to handle conflicts through the use of drama. *Journal of Peace Education*, 4(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400200601171164>
- Müller, E., Nutting, D., & Keddell, K. (2017). Understanding ArtAbility: Using qualitative methods to assess the impact of a multi-genre arts education program on middle-school students with autism and their neurotypical teen mentors. *Youth Theatre Journal*, 31(1), 48–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2016.1225612>
- North American Drama Therapy Association. (2021). *What is drama therapy?* <https://www.nadta.org/what-is-drama-therapy>
- O'Toole, J., & Burton, B. (2005). Acting against conflict and bullying. The Brisbane DRACON project 1996–2004—emergent findings and outcomes. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 10(3), 269–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569780500275873>
- Peterson, S. S., & Horton, L. (2019). Child-directed dramatic play as identity text in Northern Canadian Indigenous kindergarten classrooms. *Literacy*, 53(4), 254–264. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12174>
- Şenol, F. B., & Metin, E. N. (2021). Examining the effectiveness of drama education programs on the interaction and social skills of children in preschool classes applying inclusive practices. *Education & Science/Eğitim ve Bilim*, 46(208), 189–212. <https://doi.org/10.15390/eb.2021.9033>
- Stratou, E., Aristotelis, K., Gamvroula, A., Antonopoulos, S., & Saridi, M. (2023). The effect of drama in education on social skills development of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). *International Journal of Caring Sciences*, 16(1), 464–473.

Appendix A

Table 1.1: Data Collection Methods used in Chosen Literature

<i>Researcher(s)</i>	<i>Data Collection Method(s)</i>
Broach et al., 2016	Pre- and Post-tests Pre- and Post-experience Interviews
Brouillette, 2010	Pre- and Post- Interviews and Questionnaires
Ceylan and Gök Çolak, 2019	Pre- and Post-tests
Freeman et al., 2003	Pre- and Post-tests
Gallagher, 2018	Post-experience Interviews and Questionnaires
Gattenhof, 2012	Field Observations Ongoing Interviews and Questionnaires
Guli et al., 2013	Pre- and Post-tests Field Observations Post-experience Interviews
Joronen et al., 2011	Pre- and Post-experience Interviews and Questionnaires
Korošec and Zorec, 2020	Pre- and Post-tests Field Assessments
Malm and Löfgren, 2007	Audio and Video Recordings Ongoing Interviews and Questionnaires Field Observations
Müller et al., 2017	Ongoing Interviews and Questionnaires
O'Toole and Burton, 2012	Video Recordings of Sessions Ongoing Interviews and Questionnaires
Şenol and Metin, 2021	Pre- and Post-tests Field Observations
Peterson and Horton, 2019	Video Recordings of Sessions Ongoing Interviews Group Conversations with Elders
Stratou et al., 2023	Pre- and Post-experience Interviews and Questionnaires Field Observations

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura DeGraff is an elementary school teacher and passionate arts educator in Alberta. Throughout her career, she has taught music and drama to students aged 5-18 in schools and in community-based programs. She is currently completing her Master of Education (Curriculum and Pedagogy) at the University of Alberta.