Illuminating SEL Through the Arts: How Can Creative Drama Be Used to Support SEL Education for Young Children?

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ABSTRACT

The importance of integrating Social-Emotional Learning into classrooms cannot be underestimated. This study seeks to find the challenges and successes of using creative drama to support SEL for young children. It investigates students' social and emotional status, the SEL strategies students already use when feeling big emotions, and their opinions of drama lessons. Methods of data collection include a review of literature and research and interviews with five children between the ages of three and seven. Suggestions for teachers' approaches to SEL education and recommendations for an SEL-based creative drama curriculum are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Over the summer of 2022, I worked as the summer program director and drama teacher for an urban school in Massachusetts, where I am currently in my fifth year of teaching. I had a young student who while being a kind, smart, and curious child, was struggling socially and emotionally. When this student felt emotions, they would take over, and he would begin to exhibit behaviors that could be described as self-destructive. However, the other teachers and I felt that this student was making progress. We saw him taking time to cool down when upset, removing himself from upsetting situations, and showing empathy towards others even in disagreements. We were excited to see how he would further progress and would speak often of how we could continue to work with him to further develop his social-emotional development, such as with arts programming. Then the unthinkable happened: he transferred to another school, and we have not seen him since. It was because I was thinking of this student, how much progress he had made, and how much further he had to go that the idea of using creative drama for social and emotional growth came to mind.

This research explores the use of creative drama with preschool through second-grade students to support social-emotional learning. The study has two main goals: to gain an understanding of children's social-emotional development at this moment in time, and an understanding of both the draw-ins and drawbacks creative drama has for young children.

In conducting my initial research for this study, I found that a key component is missing from the existing literature: the voices of the children. In case studies speaking on how play can be successful, lessons are deemed successful by the teachers, but not by the children who were actively participating in the lesson. In doing my research, I set out to expand this narrative.

Young children deserve their opinions and experiences to impact their education, rather than to be told what to think. It is an injustice to young people for educators to not be thoughtful about their feelings, and to not teach them that their voices have merit. I value the voices and opinions of young children, and I am making their words and

actions the focus of my research.

METHODOLOGY

A total of five children were interviewed for this research: three-year-old Billy, five-year-old Esme, five-year-old Bob, seven-year-old Roselyn, and seven-year-old Megan. Three female-identifying children were interviewed, and two male-identifying children were interviewed. Every child mentioned in this study identifies as white. Each child interviewed was familiar to me before the interview. Parental consent was obtained, as well as each child's consent to participate. Pseudonyms were used in place of participants' names for anonymity.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social-emotional learning, or SEL, is a buzzword that is often thrown around by educators but is rarely defined. To truly understand SEL, you have to first break it down into two parts: social learning and emotional learning. Social learning includes the skills that allow children to relate to others effectively and to contribute in positive ways to their family, school, and community. It is how people relate to and interact with others. Emotional learning is the ability to recognize emotions and regulate strong emotions to maintain effective relationships with others. Emotional learning addresses a person's feelings and how they respond to others' feelings. Social-emotional learning as a whole is the combination of social development and emotional understanding. Putting those definitions together, SEL is learning the skills to recognize and regulate your own emotions while having empathy and understanding for other people and their emotions (Kirk & Jay, 2018).

SEL can be broken down into five competencies per the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, better known by its acronym CASEL. These are Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Building, and Responsible Decision Making (CASEL, 2022). Each competency has specific identifiers. For Self-Awareness, key aspects to observe include identifying emotions, self-perception, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and the ability to recognize strengths. Self-Management includes stress

management, impulse control, and goal setting, among others. Social Awareness includes empathy, perspective-taking, respect for others, and appreciating diversity. Relationship Building includes communication and teamwork. Responsible Decision Making includes identifying problems, solving problems, and reflecting, among other identifiers (Bridges, 2002).

Teachers have the direct ability to foster classrooms that support social-emotional learning. The most discussed skill for teachers to utilize when promoting SEL in their class is developing positive relationships with students. Kirk and Jay promote the creation of strong relationships between students and educators for the purpose of evaluating SEL skills and say sustained shared thinking contributes to positive relationships since emotional connections are formed when sustained shared thinking happens regularly.

Children's In-Body Responses

I collected children's in-body responses to certain emotions as data. I did this to determine student skills in Self-Awareness, specifically evaluating the identification of emotions. For example, I can identify when I am feeling nervous because I feel butterflies in my stomach. Understanding where children feel emotions in their bodies could be key in discussing how to identify and manage these emotions as part of their SEL-based curriculum.

When it comes to feeling happy, many children reported feeling happiness in their faces and minds. However, Roselyn (age seven) said that when she feels happy, she "feels it everywhere." When it comes to feeling sad, answers from children vary. Billy (age three) pointed to his heart when asked where he felt sad in his body. Roselyn (age seven) said she feels it in her arms and legs, saying "Sometimes I get goosebumps." Megan (age seven) feels sadness in her head, right near her temples. When it comes to feeling angry, children said they felt this emotion in their heads, faces, hearts, and stomachs.

Esme (age five) and Bob (age five), who were interviewed together, spoke at length about where anger is for them:

Victoria: So when you're angry, what does your face do? Esme: It scrunches!

Victoria: What happens to the rest of your body when you feel

angry? Where do you feel it in your body?

Esme: In my heart.

Victoria: You feel it angry in your heart. Where do you (Bob) feel angry in your body?

Bob: In basically my whole stomach.

In thinking about supporting children's SEL, I feel that talking about in-body responses to emotions is vital since identifying emotions is a key "look for" of Self-Awareness. In creating a drama curriculum that supports SEL, addressing in-body responses could play a big role in lessons that surround Self-Awareness and Self-Management.

Children's Emotional Recall & Recognition

I asked students to share stories of times they felt certain emotions, and times when they saw other people experiencing certain emotions. This was to determine students' skills in Self-Awareness since the key factors of this competency are identifying emotions, and Social Awareness since the key factors of this are empathy and perspective taking (Bridges, 2002).

Students excelled in identifying their own emotions. Every student told a story about a time when they were happy. Many students were also able to speak about a time when they were sad. The exception to this was Billy (age 3). During our interview, he said the following:

Victoria: Can you tell me about a time when you felt sad at school?

Billy: (whispers) Yeah.

Victoria: When did you feel sad at school?

Billy: (whispers) I don't know.

While he was saying this, his face dropped, he looked as if he was about to cry, and he whispered his sentences. I feel his hesitation in sharing a story about a time when he was sad is because thinking about being sad in the past made him begin to feel sad in the present

moment. He could not separate past sad moments from his current emotional state. This was not an issue with any of the other interviewees. It is most likely due to age, with Billy being only three years old and the other interviewees being five and up.

These stories show that students, no matter what age, have a good sense of Self-Awareness. They know how to identify their emotions, and can clearly recall a time when they have felt different emotions. However, sometimes going back to memories tied to certain emotions can cause emotional reactions. Billy (age three) shows this since he became sad at the thought of having to tell a sad story. This is something to be aware of when working with young children and talking about emotions.

In recognizing other people's emotions, students seem to have a good sense of identifying the feelings of others. When specifically asked to identify a time a friend was feeling sad, every child was able to tell a story. Some children spoke of times when they helped to comfort their friend. Roselyn (age seven) spoke about a time when a friend was down and she tried to cheer her up:

> Roselyn: Well, I also had a time when, um, her little brother, who was like two, uh, um, broke her favorite glass… And she was so sad and I did it. I cheered her up by making her, by telling her that we can make a fort and picking on, um, their, her little brother and all the boys.

However, not every student told a story where they were the person who helped to comfort their friend. Billy (age three) spoke about a specific time he saw a friend be sad, but he did not do anything to help:

> Billy: Anya. Anya, she was here yesterday...she got in there. She zoomed down there.
>
> Victoria: Yeah? Why did she do that?
>
> Billy: Cuz she was about to cry.
>
> Victoria: She was about to cry. Why was she about to cry?
>
> Billy: Cuz she was sad.

Victoria: She was sad. Did you help her?

Billy: (Nods)

Victoria: What did you do to help her?

Billy: I don't know.

Billy (age three) was not able to attempt to cheer a friend up, while Roselyn (age seven) was, even if it was not in the most positive manner. Age may be a factor in this, and Roselyn being seven and Billy being three years old may be the reason why Roselyn was able to cheer a friend up and not Billy. It is a skill that takes time to develop-Roselyn may be at a place socially and emotionally that Billy is not.

Social awareness was seen in every interviewee, no matter what age, with them being able to identify a time when another kid felt sad. However, not every child showed Relationship Skills or Responsible Decision Making skills in these stories. Some children spoke about a time when they tried to help cheer up a friend or make their friends' situation better, while others simply spoke from the perspective of an observer.

Children's SEL Strategies and Tools

Next, I identified the strategies used by the children to handle their "big emotions" to determine how young children practice Self-Management skills. Self-Management skills include impulse control, stress management, and self-discipline (Bridges, 2002). Identifying what children already do to manage these impulses and stress levels will then pave the way to understanding what needs to be addressed further.

The tools that children listed to calm down from emotions such as sadness, anger, and nervousness were substantial. In speaking about calming down from sadness, Megan (age seven) said "Sometimes I like to read a book or watch my iPad if I'm at home, and at school, I just like to talk to my friends and stuff like that."

In speaking about how to calm down after feeling angry, Bob (age five) and Esme (age five) in their joint interview spoke about how they calm down.

Victoria: Right. What if you're a little angry? How do you react then?

Bob: I feel basically it's, I just, like if I get medium angry. You know what happens really close to being fine but not that close. Like it, like, 10 inches off from no nine or eight inches off from that. So eight inches off would be like was when I have to, he wouldn't gimme something back that was actually so you, you know what happened. So I just go to my bed, and like need some calming down.

Victoria: What else do you do to calm down?

Esme: When I calm down I pet my dog.

Many children's calm-down strategies that they mentioned in interviews, such as the ones above, are ones that they cannot implement at school. The only interviewee who came up with a viable calm-down strategy that can be done anywhere is Roselyn (age seven), who spoke about taking deep breaths until she feels calmer.

When I asked students about going to teachers to help with their emotions, I got varying responses. Bob (age five), became very nervous from this question. His shoulders shot up, his smile dropped, and his tone of voice shifted. The interaction went as follows:

Victoria: Bob, Why is it, Why don't you talk to teachers about how you feel?

Bob: I just don't.

Victoria: You just don't. Well, I can see you tensing up right now. What are you feeling right now when you're saying that?

Bob: Tiny bit nervous.

Meanwhile, Bob's younger brother Billy (age three) spoke at ease about how his teachers have helped him calm down when he is feeling nervous.

Victoria: Do other people help you feel not nervous anymore?

Billy: Yeah.

Victoria: Yeah, who helps you?

Billy: The teachers.

Victoria: The teachers, what did the teachers do to help you?

Billy: Read books to me.

While some children are comfortable talking to a teacher about their emotions, only some children want to seek help from a teacher. This could be an aspect of Relationship Building, where some students have a positive relationship where they can talk to a teacher while other kids are just not there in terms of relationships. It could also be an individual student's anxiety. It is difficult to determine the exact reason why, especially when the students themselves cannot identify why they will not go to a teacher.

In thinking about Self-Management strategies as a whole, I feel that this is an area that needs to be worked on with young children. Not every child was able to identify a calm-down tool or technique suitable for every location. Even when a young child knows in theory that they should use an SEL tool, such as taking a deep breath, the data does not show whether or not students consistently utilize these tools, so I am unsure of how effective each skill truly is for children.

CREATIVE DRAMA

Play is a powerful tool that is sometimes overlooked in the field of education. In The Dramatic Difference: Drama in the Preschool and Kindergarten Classroom, it is stated that, "the child's primary mode of learning is through physical interaction with their environment", and "in the early years, interactions with the environment occurs primarily through play and imitation" (Brown & Pleydell, 1999, p. 2). Through play and interactions with peers and teachers, children develop communication skills, conversational routines, and oral vocabulary. Play also enhances self-regulation skills by teaching children how to

regulate behaviors and emotions while interacting with peers (Taylor & Boyer, 2019).

Creative drama is an enhanced form of play. It is described as a learning medium, "emerging from the spontaneous play of young children and utilizing the art of theatre to build and enhance the participants' artistic sensitivity, awareness of self, others, and the world and develop each child's dramatic imagination" (Pinciotti, 1993). Creative drama is, unlike other forms of drama, intended for its participants rather than an audience (Szecsi, 2008). It is an inherently collaborative art form, always done as a group. Activities that fall under the umbrella of creative drama include improvisation, role-playing, pantomime, movement, and gesture (Pinciotti, 1993).

Creative drama can teach many skills. Pinciotti (1993) states that dramatic learning as a whole teaches "knowledge, skills, feelings, and dispositions in four categories: dramatic behaviors and theatre skills, imagery and imagination, group development, and the connection of imagination and action." Hensel (1991) says that creative drama activities help develop skills of social sensitivity and conflict resolution.

Drama is a great tool for working with children. When specifically working with young students, "classroom drama is process-oriented" and, "presenting plays with young children is not recommended, particularly in a formal setting" (Brown & Pleydell, 1999, p. 3). Children participating in drama are meant to learn through experience, with methods "ranging from spontaneous drama initiated by a child's curiosity to drama work that is planned and guided by a teacher with specific educational goals in mind" (Brown and Pleydell, 1999, p. 3).

Drama Draw-Ins

In interviews, I asked students what drama activities they enjoyed to get a sense of how drama is engaging for them. All of these students are often led in activities involving pantomime, improvisation, puppetry, and tableaux work. The younger students I interviewed stated that they enjoyed activities that allowed them to play pretend. Esme (age five) spoke of liking activities where she gets to act like animals like "a piggy and a horse" because it makes her "feel silly." Esme and Bob's class in particular is led in drama activities that allow for improvisation and character embodiment, including the game she is referring to entitled "Will You Cross My Swamp" in which students must transform their bodies and voices into different animals and creatures to cross the

"swamp" (the classroom).

Their class is also led by the teacher in many movement-oriented activities, which the students reportedly enjoy participating in. The game Esme named her favorite was freeze dance because she gets "to have fun and dance and freeze" but also "cause so we get to take a break when we're out." Bob (age five) spoke about enjoying doing a shakedown with his arms and legs, or as he referred to it "that calming down like shake body", saying it made him feel good.

I also found that older students spoke at length about enjoying the creative aspects of drama classes. Megan (age seven) spoke about enjoying tableaux work in drama classes and the creativity that comes with those exercises. In speaking about a game entitled "I Am A Tree", where students one by one become one object or character of their choice that would surround a tree to make a large tableau, she said the following:

> Megan: Because it's just fun cuz you can kind of be whatever you wanna be in the scene, and the trust and choice like, yeah.
>
> Victoria: Do you like having a choice? Megan: Uh, yes.
>
> Victoria: Why is that?
>
> Megan: Because when you have a choice, you can be really creative.

While the younger students and the older students may have had different ways of phrasing it, the message of these interviews is clear: children enjoy drama best when they get to actively pretend, create, and move around in class. This data shows that providing the opportunity for children to have fun and create in class while addressing important content may be the key to high engagement.

Drama Dislikes

I also collected data about what kids dislike about drama. I found that the majority of interviewees had nothing to say about disliking any activities. Bob, Esme, and Megan were all asked about this, and all had nothing to say in terms of dislikes. Part of this could very well be that they always enjoy the activities done in drama class. They may

have also felt discomfort in sharing what they dislike since I am their drama teacher.

Roselyn (age seven) was the exception to this, saying the following:

Roselyn: Don't like, um, I don't really like when, um, like other things, like copy, copy ours.

Victoria: Yeah. So you don't like it when people copy your idea?

Roselyn: Totally. Yeah. Like copy, really copy, copy.

Victoria: Yeah. Um, how does it make you feel?

Roselyn: It makes me feel mad.

While the other children did not mention this as a downside to participating in drama, there is a possibility that it could be an annoyance for them to see others copying their original ideas, so it is something to be aware of.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above research, I recommend that all five social-emotional competencies can and should be introduced to young children. These students' knowledge in Self-Management, Relationship Building, and Responsible Decision Making varied based on the interviews, with some children showing emerging skills in these competencies while others did not show any.

Students verbally showed Self-Awareness and Social Awareness in their specific answers, but that does not mean that their knowledge is put into practice. All of the SEL competencies can be introduced to children and improved upon, especially as they tend to develop with age, so giving young children the basis of understanding all five is key to their SEL growth.

I found that many of the calm-down techniques that children have may not translate well in public, such as Megan saying she likes to calm down with her iPad. Introducing calm-down techniques for Self-Management that can be done anywhere could be highly beneficial for

young children to learn and apply to their everyday life. Leading the class in specific role-plays where students can practice taking deep breaths when upset, asking for breaks, or using a physical calm-down tool for stress management could be helpful for this purpose.

Given that many students spoke about enjoying drama, and with only one dislike being mentioned, I do recommend using drama to support an SEL curriculum. Drama is an engaging subject where students can have fun, and contributes to an active learning environment that best suits young children's needs. Creative drama will allow for students to learn SEL concepts in a hands-on manner, and give space for students to practice SEL techniques and strategies for everyday life.

Educators should utilize activities that involve role-play and improvisation which will then lead to high student engagement, such as "Will You Cross My Swamp" which was mentioned before, or role-playing scenarios with puppets. Students also reported enjoying movement-oriented activities, and games such as freeze dance and "Night at the Museum", where students freeze as statues in a museum and can only move when the teacher is not looking, can be utilized in the classroom for engagement purposes.

I would also suggest providing activities where students get to lead parts of an activity, rather than solely the teacher, especially since students spoke about enjoying having choices in lessons. An example of a game like that provides this opportunity is "Simon Says", where students can work on their Social Awareness skills because the game requires them to deeply listen to others and follow directions. Another example comes from Brown & Pleydell (1999), where the teacher presents the problem of being stuck in a whale, and the group has to brainstorm how to get out together. The teacher makes sure to "give all the children an opportunity to talk" while encouraging original ideas from each student, and then acting it out (Brown & Pleydell, 1999, p. 11). A group problem-solving role play such as this could develop Responsible Decision Making Skills while also fulfilling the children's desire to have choice.

LIMITATIONS

All children interviewed are students at the same school. Their point of view is therefore limited, especially when speaking about school

matters and teacher interactions. Their opinions on drama are also coming from a biased point of view- they are being asked about drama by one of the people who teach their drama classes, in the same building where they take those drama classes. This familiarity with the interviewer may have skewed some answers. Were I to continue research, I would interview students from different schools in different areas and see how the results vary and change.

Another major limitation of this study is that all the students interviewed are white, cis-gendered, and able-bodied. If I were to continue my research, I would diversify the group of students interviewed. A more diverse pool would expand the findings of this study, and lead to a greater understanding of SEL in all young children.

CONCLUSION

Young children's social and emotional learning status was overall more developed than expected. Students have a good sense of Self-Awareness and Social Awareness, being able to identify times when they felt certain emotions and identify times when others felt these emotions. However, there is an apparent lack of Self-Management, Relationship Building, and Responsible Decision Making. These skills can be addressed and developed with young children, and educators like myself have the opportunity to do this in our work.

While a creative drama curriculum is not going to be the end-all-be-all solution for students' SEL development and growth, creative drama can be an engaging and fun way to teach SEL strategies and tools to young children. If creative drama provides the opportunity for children to play, pretend, and make choices, it can then open the doors for students to grow and succeed on their social-emotional learning journey.

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