

# Children's experiences of a drama programme in social and emotional learning

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## Children's experiences of a drama programme in social and emotional learning

The aim of the school-based drama programme was to enhance child social and emotional learning. The programme was implemented by class teachers or teacher-school nurse dyads among fourth and fifth graders (10–12 years old) during the school year 2007–2008. Teachers and school nurses received training before the implementation. One hundred and four students participated. The purpose of the pilot study was to explore student experiences concerning the programme and the learning experiences. After the program, questionnaires with structured and open-ended questions were completed

by 90 students (response rate 87%). Additionally, four focus group interviews were conducted. The research data were analysed statistically and by using qualitative data analysis. The quantitative results indicate that most students liked the programme and were enthusiastic about it. According to the qualitative data, students described, e.g. enhanced social and emotional learning and increased understanding of diversity and consequences of bullying. Additionally, drama transformed prosocial behaviour.

**Keywords:** school-based program, process drama, school children, social and emotional learning.

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## Background

There seems to be a general agreement that schools need to foster children's social-emotional development, but these skills are rarely taught explicitly and effectively (1). Social and emotional well-being can be seen as an indicator of mental health. According to a recent systematic review (2) social and emotional well-being helps protect children against emotional and behavioural problems, violence and crime, teenage pregnancy and the misuse of drugs and alcohol.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills to recognise and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions and handle interpersonal situations effectively. A recent review of research (3) indicates that SEL programs improved both

students' social-emotional skills and academic performance. They also reduced students' conduct problems and emotional distress. We see drama in education (DIE) as an appropriate and natural means of improving SEL among primary school children. DIE is concerned with the exploration of themes and problems through role play and improvisation, with emphasis on developing, among other things, the child's imagination and social skills (4). The aim of DIE is to engage children in learning which addresses potentially sensitive matters in the field of personal, social and health education (5). In the drama learning process, the student creates new relationships of meaning through the transformative process.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) works to advance the science- and evidence-based practice of SEL. CASEL was founded in 1994 by Daniel Goleman and educator/philanthropist Eileen Rockefeller Growald in the United States. CASEL's first years focused on gathering scientific evidence to demonstrate the contributions of SEL to students' school success, health, well-being, peer and family relationships and citizenship (<http://www.casel.org/about/index.php>). Several study reports have been published in the United States (6). In Finland, a number of researchers have joined CASEL and studied SEL (7). CASEL has identified

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five groups of inter-related core social and emotional competencies: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (8). Academic and social-emotional learning takes place best when using varied instructional procedures, such as groups, drama, art and digital media. This also requires parent involvement and well-trained staff (9).

We agree with Devaney et al. (10) on these competence areas and highlight that especially the drama process opens up understanding and alternative ways of acting in the reality of human relations at the individual as well as community level (11, 12). Drama also involves dynamic and democratic relationships between students, the teacher or other adult in school, such as the school nurse and knowledge (12, p.21). We assume that drama as an aesthetic experience in the learning process helps emotional expression and awareness and fosters self-knowledge.

A recent systematic review (13) showed that school-based drama programmes succeeded in increasing knowledge and positive attitudes related to health behaviour, such as healthy eating (14), non smoking (15) and sexual health (16). Additionally, positive effects of arts programs on social skills and on conflict management have been reported (17–19). Toivanen (20) found growth in child self-awareness, self-confidence and social skills in a 1-year theatre education process. O'Toole and Burton (21) used drama for assisting conflict management in schools. The findings indicated that students were using the knowledge they gained from the project in real life conflicts. Previous study indicated that students in primary school yearned for support in relationship issues from school nurses (22). These previous study results inspired us to study how drama as a didactic method works in the context of a standard curriculum among primary teachers and school nurses who have no drama education.

## Aims of the study

In this study, we examined students' experiences of a school-based drama program. We also explored students' SEL experiences. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were utilised.

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of students during a drama program. The specific research questions were as follows:

1. How did students perceive the drama program?
2. What kind of learning through drama did students express?

## Methods

### *Drama programme*

The aim of the drama programme was to improve children's social and emotional well-being, such as empathy,

SEL, social competence, student-teacher interaction, child-parent interaction. In this article, we concentrate in aims of social and emotional well-being and learning. The drama programme was designed by the experienced drama expert and educator with the teachers before the implementation.

Four teachers and one school nurse participated in a 2-day seminar on using drama with children in April 2007. A drama educator, the second author and the first author were responsible for the training. Two drama handbooks with themes focusing on social and emotional well-being were also distributed. Additionally, five counselling sessions and online counselling via email were provided by the same drama experts during the drama programme implementation. Counselling sessions included mutual reflections of previous drama sessions and home activities and sharing ideas for the coming sessions and home activities.

### *Participants*

One hundred and four students from the fourth and fifth grades participated in the drama programme in four different classes in Southern Finland. The age ranged from 10 to 12 years. Fifty-two percent of the participants were girls and 48% boys. The study sample of questionnaire data consisted of 90 students. The response rate was 87%. Half of the students were fourth graders and half fifth graders ( $M_{age}$  11 years, age range: 10–12 years). Fifty-six percent were girls and 44% boys. The interview sample consisted of 16 students (8 girls and 8 boys) from four classes (two fourth grades and two fifth grades).

### *Implementation*

The intended/preferred drama programme consisted of one drama session per month from September to April, for a total of eight sessions. The implemented drama programme included 4–9 classroom drama sessions (depending on the teacher), 1–4 follow-up home activities, and three parents' evenings. The exposures varied between the classes. One class implemented the programme with a lower intensity (less than eight exposures), whereas three classes distributed at least eight drama exposures during the school year. The programme was delivered by the regular class teachers, or a class teacher and a school nurse as a dyad. The school nurse visited every class once. The programme was delivered to an entire classroom, i.e. each teacher implemented the programme in her or his own class.

*Classroom drama sessions.* Classroom drama sessions (4–9 sessions depending on the class) were based on process drama. The following drama techniques were used: Hot seating, collective drawing, sound tracking, argumentation, collective roles, still images and a conscience corridor. Pretexts for the drama sessions referred to social matters and relationships, such as friendship, bullying, tolerance

and child abuse. All the classes used the story *My friend whale* by Simon James published in Owens's and Barber's (23) book *Drama works*. The story was about friendship, loss of a friend and loneliness. Two classes worked with *Pekka's story*, which was about tolerance, bullying and settlement (24). Three classes used *Ragamuffin*, modified from Hugh Lupton's story published in Owens' and Barber's (25) book *Mapping drama*. The story was about child abuse and support. Additionally, one class worked on the bullying topic through the fairy tale *The Ugly Duckling*. The same story was utilised in several drama sessions.

*Home activities.* Home activities (1–4 home activities depending on the class) included interaction tasks between parent and child. For instance, the child interviewed his or her parent about school life and bullying when the parent was a school child. Parents also wrote three good things about their child and gave the document to the child.

*Parents' evenings.* Parents' evenings are a common institution in Finland. These usually comprise evening meetings where the class teacher is available for parents to discuss school issues. In this project, parents' evenings were based on themes which emerged from parents' and teachers' written suggestions. The themes included were bullying, family-school cooperation, parental monitoring and common rules at school. The first parents' evening (approximately 50 participants) was implemented by using forum theatre. A forum theatre group performed a play where a girl was blackmailed money by her classmates but did not dare to tell her parents. She lied to her parents, detached herself from them and ceased to communicate with them. After the first showing, a brief discussion occurred amongst the audience, mediated by the Joker (second author) and the audience suggested a different strategy. Then, the play was restarted and new ideas were incorporated in the story. Then parents discussed the common rules at school.

The second parents' evening (13 participants) was carried out by using the coffee table method. Parents, teachers and school nurse were divided into four groups consisting of a number of parents and a teacher. Each group concentrated on solving actual situations, such as grade disappointment and awakening sexuality, alternately from the view of parents and teachers. The third parents' evening (15 participants) was based on a process drama concerning a schoolboy and cooperation between home and school. Parents' evenings were tutored by the drama teacher (second author) who used drama methods to enhance interaction between parents and parents and teachers and school nurses.

#### Data collection

*Questionnaires.* First, data were collected from students through questionnaires including three questions of drama

experiences and background variables (age, gender and grade). The instrument had a visual analogue scale (100 mm) where respondents specified their level of agreement with a statement by indicating a position along a continuous line between two end-points (☺(happy face) = *agree*; ☹(sad face) = *disagree*). Second, there were four open-ended questions concerning the drama experiences and learning through drama.

#### Interviews

Third, data were gathered through semi-structured focus-group interviews. Interviews were conducted with students immediately after the programme. The main interview questions were: *What kinds of issues do you recall about the drama programme? and Did you learn something in the drama programme? If yes, what kinds of things did you learn?* Four focus group interviews were performed with four students (two girls and two boys) per group per class.

#### Data analysis

*Questionnaires.* The data from structured questions were described as medians and ranges, and the differences between genders and grades were analyzed by using non-parametric tests. The classes were divided into two categories according to the intensity of the implementation as follows: A high-intensity programme among three of the classes ( $n = 68$ ) that provided at least one exposure per month during the school year and a low-intensity programme in one class ( $n = 22$ ) that provided less than one exposure per month. The statistical significance level was set at  $p < 0.05$  (26).

*Interviews.* The interview data were transcribed verbatim on 53 single-spaced pages and the data gathered from students' open-ended responses comprised eight pages. The data were read several times in order to obtain a sense of the whole. The data were analyzed by using inductive qualitative data analysis recommended by Dey (27) and Auerbach and Silverstein (28). All expressions concerning research questions were indexed in a table. After that, the expressions were compressed into briefer statements. These succinct formulations of each question were next compared with each other and categorised so that expressions with similar content were classified into the same subcategory and named by its content. Next, the subcategories were abstracted into main categories.

#### Ethical considerations

The data were collected using a self-administrated anonymous questionnaire. The administration of the questionnaires to the students was completed during the school class in all the study classes by the first author. The study

was approved by the head teachers. Written permission was received from one parent of each family before the implementation of the programme. Additionally, written permissions were received from students and one parent of each family before the interview.

## Results

The results are presented according to the study aims. First, we explain the students' perceptions of the drama programme according to the questionnaires and interviews. Second, we describe student's experiences about the programme-based on interviews.

### Students' perceptions

**Questionnaire data.** According to the *quantitative data*, the majority of the students enjoyed the drama sessions ( $Md = 82$ ,  $Range = 0-100$ ) and participated enthusiastically ( $Md = 80$ ,  $Range = 0-100$ ). However, 19% of the students gave a rating of less than 50, which means that they at least slightly disagreed with the statement *I liked the drama session*. Thirty-six percent of the students from the low-intensity drama programme class gave a rating of less than 50, whereas 13% of the students from the high-intensity classes did so.

Students from the fourth grade ( $Md = 92$ ,  $Range = 1-100$ ) liked the drama sessions more than students from the fifth grade ( $Md = 79$ ,  $Range = 0-100$ ), but the medians between the classes differed statistically significantly from each other ( $p = 0.047$ ). Girls ( $Md = 89$ ,  $Range = 9-100$ ) reported liking the drama session more than boys ( $Md = 78$ ,  $Range = 0-100$ ), and girls ( $Md = 82$ ,  $Range = 18-100$ ) participated more enthusiastically in drama sessions than boys ( $Md = 64$ ,  $Range = 0-100$ ), but the difference failed to reach statistical significance ( $p = 0.051, 0.055$ ). The low ratings of the boys from the class with the low-intensity drama programme decreased the median values for boys. Both genders similarly

assessed the intensity of their classmates' participation in drama ( $Md = 73$ ) (Fig. 1).

### Interviews and open end questions

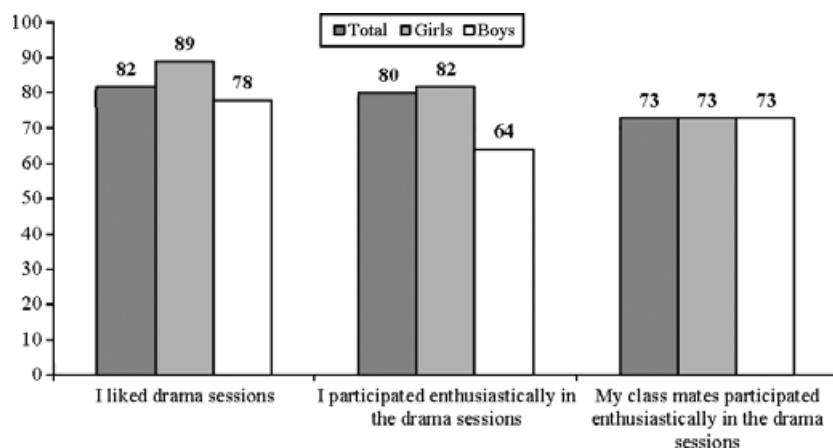
According to the *qualitative data* from interviews ( $n = 16$ ) and open-ended responses of students ( $n = 80$ ), the drama programme was mostly described positively. Tables 1 and 2 show the main themes of students' positive experiences of the programme. Negative experiences included four themes. First, *doubt of authenticity of the stories* confused some of the students. Second, the *open end of the stories* irritated a few of the students. Third, some of the students found the *drama sessions boring* without analyzing this in more detail. Fourth, getting an *insight into the role person* was perceived as *difficult* by a couple of students.

The positive drama experiences of students were categorised into two categories: Verbal and nonverbal mutuality and Increased empathy. These experiences were related to the drama methods and techniques and mostly occurred in a fictional world. In what follows, we will analyze themes that emerged inductively from the interviews and written responses of students. We constructed a table with the key findings of the students' drama experiences (Table 1)

### Verbal and nonverbal mutuality

**Mutual conservation.** Mutual conservation with classmates, teachers and parents was included in the drama programme. Mutual conversations with classmates occurred in pairs or small group discussions before or after the drama activities. The teacher was perceived to be more informal and a listener during the drama sessions. The home activities with parents mostly included conversations.

Mutual conversations referred also to teamwork, i.e. small group work, such as collective drawing, doing still images, sound tracking and collective roles. It additionally meant critical group discussions after each drama action.



**Figure 1** Medians of drama experiences perceived by students in gender groups ( $n = 90$ ), (%). Scale 0–100, 0 = totally disagree, 100 = totally agree.

**Table 1** Students' drama experiences

| Category                       | Subcategory   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Verbal and nonverbal mutuality | Mutual conversation<br>Increased self-expression  |
| Increased empathy              | Listening to others<br>Emphasising role characters<br>Creativity<br>Processing emotions |

**Table 2** Students' learning experiences through drama

| Category  | Subcategory   |
|---|---|
| Increased understanding of diversity among people | Significance and universality of friendship<br>Consequences of maltreatment |
| Transformed prosocial behaviour                   | Friendly behaviour<br>Positive interaction with adults                      |

Drama created humour in the classroom; it made students laugh together and provided amusement for the whole class.

They (drama sessions) were funny. Otherwise we would not have laughed our heads off. (Boy, fifth grade)  
 You cannot only think of yourself but you should consider others ... and discuss as a team. (Girl, fifth grade)  
 I talked about the issues with my family. (Girl, 4th grade)  
 We worked more as a group and... we did all kinds of things – reading, performance, drawing. (Girl, 5th grade)

*Self-expression.* *Self-expression* implied freedom and the ability to express oneself beyond imitating an action. Self-expression also meant that you have something to say and you can do it. Self-expression meant also increased argumentation which emerged especially from the story of *Ragamuffin*. The students were divided into different groups representing animals and they had to give reasons why the girl should ally with them. Students enjoyed discovering reasons and justification for their doings and decisions.

...when I had to figure out how the story continued. (Girl, 5th grade)  
 We had to explain why the Ragamuffin should choose the squirrels and we had to give reasons, e.g. that we would be able to offer a warm place to stay. (Girl, 5th grade)

*Increased empathy*

Empathy was expressed as diverse insights into the lives of role persons, such as the perspectives of a bully and a

victim. Students used their imagination to speak, think and feel like the person in the story.

The stories made me think about my own issues and what it would be like to be e.g. a ragamuffin. (Girl, 4th grade)

*Creativity.* Creativity referred to the process where students generated a new way of seeing, such as a different point of view in the story or a new idea in terms of problem-solving. Creativity emerged, e.g. from listening to the story which was perceived as relaxing and easy by students. Most students enjoyed the listening and the stories.

I learned to create new words and to listen. (Boy, 4th grade)

*Processing emotions.* Processing emotions included both internal and external processing of emotions that emerged from the stories. Emotions were processed, e.g. by using drama methods, such as hot-seating where one student 'in role' is in the hot-seat and answers questions from others in the group. Students named emotions such as joy, sadness and irritation evoked by the stories. Processing emotions was closely related to empathy experiences but processing was more conscious than the insight into the role person.

When we were wondering how the persons of the story feel and what they tell and think. (Girl, 4th grade)

*Learning experiences*

*Interviews and open end questions.* Learning experiences could be categorised in two main categories: Increased understanding of diversity among people and Transformed prosocial behaviour. Increased understanding may be situated between a fictional context and a real context. Transformed prosocial behaviour referred to the factual world where students aimed to strive towards a higher ideal and recognised changes in interaction. Increased understanding of diversity among people referred to two subcategories: Significance and universality of friendship and Consequences of maltreatment.

*Increased understanding of diversity among people.* Three of the stories included different kinds of characteristics of role persons, such as a boy who had a different dialect and clothing style. Students analyzed the diverse characteristics of the role persons and concluded that their difference was not a threat to others.

Pekka was my favorite story because it taught me that if a new classmate wore different kinds of clothes than the others, you need not bully him or her. (Boy, 4th grade)

*Significance and universality of friendship.* Especially, the stories *My friend whale* and *Ragamuffin* enhanced students'



understanding of the importance of friendship. In both stories, new friends were animals which enabled to view the friendship from a new perspective.

Friends are important and no one should be bullied.  
(Girl, 5th grade)

Loneliness is boring and everybody needs a friend.  
(Girl, 4th grade)

*Consequences of maltreatment.* Pekka's story evoked reflection upon bullying. The boy, Pekka, was seriously injured due to a bullying incident. Students were very affected by the story and reflected the possible consequences of bullying in real life.

The story Ragamuffin highlighted the child neglect theme. The girl was neglected by her uncle and she was left in a forest. Students described the uncle's evil qualities and were aware that there are wicked people in real life, too.

I learned the consequences of bullying. (Girl, 5th grade)

Not all people are kind. (Girl, 4th grade)

### Transformed prosocial behaviour

*Friendly behaviour.* Students expressed new intentions to follow through: Encouragement to find a friend and decision not to bully. The story *My friend whale* spurred the students to rethink the problem of loneliness. They began to believe in their capability to influence events, such as finding a friend. Several stories were concerned with the bullying theme, such as *Pekka's story* and *The Ugly Duckling*. The students expressed their disapproval of bullying and their intent not to bully.

... even if you move to a new place you will always find a friend. (Girl, 5th grade)

I would never start to call a new student names or bully him or her. (Boy, 5th grade)

*Positive interaction with adults.* Students had recognised a new kind of interaction between adults and parents since drama programme implementation. More democratic relationships referred to student–teacher and child–parent relationships. Teachers were perceived to be less authoritarian than before. They were considered to enable free conversation and dialogue in the classroom.

Positive feedback especially emerged from home activities in one class. Parents were asked to write three good qualities of their child. A number of students described how nice it was to read about the good things about themselves.

The teacher can also be funny and like a mate/friend  
(Girl, 4th grade)

When mom or dad had to write at least three good things about me. (Girl, 5th grade)

My father spoke well of me. (Girl, 5th grade)

### Discussion

This study demonstrated that the DIE was liked by students. Additionally, they were able to specify their experiences very carefully. Enhanced SEL as well as understanding of significant themes, such as diversity among people and significance of friendship emerged from learning through drama. These results are supported by previous findings by Toivanen (20), Rusanen (29) and O'Toole and Burton (21). Creating meanings is an active, cooperative and democratic process (30). It seemed that this process was possible in this programme despite the short preparation for the teachers. Drama is not included in the standard curriculum of Finnish schools nor is it generally included in the teacher's or school nurse's basic education. The results are thus promising: Primary school teachers' and school nurses' capability to use drama is good if they are motivated and if they get an impulse to do so.

Students' experiences were congruent with the overall aims of the programme. Students expressed improved empathy, mutuality, understanding of emotions. We found that especially improvement in empathic ability is crucial and significant in Finnish school culture. In Finnish comprehensive schools, bullying is a common phenomenon: Over 20% of school students are bullied (31). Additionally, we have experienced two tragic school shooting incidents in Finland in the last 2 years. We see that in the drama process a student is always working with his/her own personality, experiences and feelings, and at the same time he/she is closely related to the world of his/her classmates. This twofold orientation is a fruitful basis for increasing understanding of oneself and others.

Focus group interviews appeared to be an appropriate way of data collecting in this study. The interaction between group members yielded rich data. Children were able to express their original ideas and insights without limitations placed by literacy levels that plague self-reported questionnaires (32). This may have benefited boys the most. Boys were generally more active and more likely to initiate conversation in the interviews, whereas girls generally provided more detailed responses to open-ended questions.

The study has a few limitations. First, the data were retrospectively collected. Data should have been collected also during the drama programme. Second, teachers' experiences would have enriched the data. Teachers were asked about their experiences but the open-ended responses were too scanty to be included in the analysis. Third, in three classes the teachers picked out the students who participated in the focus group interview. It is possible that the teachers excluded those students who would have been critical of the drama

programme. However, all the students could participate in the survey and also express their negative experiences.

## Conclusions

Drama is an inexpensive and enjoyable method to strengthen students' SEL, and to increase their understanding of socio-emotionally relevant issues, such as bullying and child neglect. DIE also seems to create empowerment and greater democracy in classroom. We recommend the use of DIE as a method in SEL. This requires a stable school environment so that teachers, school nurses and other school professionals are able to concentrate on developing their personal approach to using drama as a didactic method.

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## Author contribution

Katja Joronen has contributed the study design, data collection/analysis and drafting of manuscript. Annukka Häkämies has contributed data analysis and drafting the manuscript. Päivi Åstedt-Kurki has contributed by giving critical comments and administrative support. Authors are in agreement on the content.

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