SOCIAL- EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THEATER ART CLASSES IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Abstract. *This article is a theoretical study that explores the concept of social-emotional learning in the context of Theatre Arts lessons in Latvian school education. In the last decades, the belief that it is not enough for the student to acquire factual knowledge only has been strengthened. The concept of social-emotional learning was created 20 years ago and has only now been introduced into Latvian educational guidelines. The study aims to establish a theoretical basis for the possibility of implementing effective social-emotional learning in Theatre Art lessons by developing social-emotional skills in students such as self-regulation, independent thinking, cooperation, and social awareness. The results certify that social-emotional learning fits organically into Theatre Arts and teachers' awareness of teaching social-emotional skills is of great importance in this process.*
Keywords: drama methods, creative drama, project "Skola 2030", social-emotional learning, theater art.

Introduction

A crucial aim of education for the future is for students to develop a strong sense of self-control and self-directedness, to be able to actively influence and steer their lives in a meaningful and responsible way. Today's school youth will have to fill jobs that don't even exist yet, deal with problems that are not yet identified, and cope with problems that today's adults have not yet solved or even recognized (Schoon, 2018). Social and emotional foundations thus help children and young people meet the challenges of the future. Young people need to be able to adapt consistently, learn new skills, meet, and overcome challenges, and work collaboratively to address important issues confronting our individual and collective lives. The capacity to do so draws on social and emotional skills, such as resilience, self-regulation, trust, empathy, and collaboration (OECD, 2019).

Social-emotional learning cannot be perceived as a separate subject rather it must be integrated in all areas of school education. The skills developed for both academic and SEL help students to understand and be aware of the learning content, increase their interest and engagement in the learning process as well as reduce disruptive behaviors (Elias, 2003).

The author of the study "Drama-based social-emotional learning" - Hakan Usakli (Usakli, 2018) – in his paper concludes that drama is an effective tool for teaching social-emotional learning to children. Drama is essentially a collective art - it requires teamwork, which, in turn, develops communication skills - both verbal and non-verbal - the ability to adapt, to express oneself, to find solutions through collaboration. It develops imagination, and creativity and promotes a healthy release of emotion.

Drama as an educational tool has already been used in the last century but significant evidence of its effectiveness emerged only at the end of the 20th century, prompting changes in formal education (Van de Water, 2020).

Methodology

This article is a theoretical study conducted using a method of literature review that highlights relevant theories and practices in the area. Educational theories were analyzed to define concepts and explain the phenomena of interest. The relevant literature and research studies were selected on the topic reflecting the need to integrate social-emotional learning into Latvian school curricula, as well as the findings of theatre educators - practitioners, and scholars on the benefits of theatre art (drama) in the development of students' personal, social, and collaborative skills.

The study aims to establish a theoretical basis for the possibility of implementing effective social-emotional learning in theatre arts lessons. The research methods are literature review and conceptual analysis. To reach the aim of the study, the following objective was set: To analyze literature to find out the theoretical basis of social-emotional learning and theater arts in education and topics included in the subject Theater Arts developed by the project "Skola2030".

Two research questions were raised to achieve the aim formulated above:
1) Is it possible to effectively integrate socio-emotional learning into Latvian primary and secondary school curricula in theatre arts lessons?
2) What are the benefits of social-emotional teaching in Theater Arts lessons?

Social-emotional learning

The term "social-emotional learning" (SEL) is relatively new – it was created in 1994 by the Fetzer Institute, an American Foundation that supports a range of initiatives aimed at promoting the social-emotional well-being of young people, preventing attention problems and risky behavior in educational settings (Aglieati et al., 2020, p. 10). Social-emotional learning is the process of acquiring and applying knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, develop and express empathy for others, build and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, n.d.).

Over the past 20 years, many evidence-based approaches and strategies have been developed to promote social-emotional learning in educational settings. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has developed approaches, that encompass thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors related to self-awareness, self-direction, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making in five clusters of competencies (Greenberg, 2023).

Research shows that social-emotional skills could be taught to students like any other subject at school. Research also shows that social-emotional skills improve academic learning. Combining academic education with social-emotional skills training in schools improves students' ability to recall and apply what they have learned. It's not just about improving learning achievement, which is, of course, an important side-effect of a pupil's well-being at school. It is also about a sense of responsibility and care for oneself and others.

In this way, the learning process ensures not only the student's academic growth but also his or her human growth. The school climate also improves, students can implement learning more effectively in their classrooms and teachers feel more inspired and able to perform their duties more successfully (Elias, 2003). "Schools worldwide must give children intellectual and practical tools they can bring to their classrooms, families, and communities. Social-emotional learning provides many of these tools" (Elias, 2003, p. 6).

Social-emotional learning in Latvia

Academic and social-emotional learning are equally important. If this is not the case, alienation, and unwillingness to go to school develop, which of course has an impact on academic knowledge, negatively affecting a child's future. Until now, educational institutions emphasized academic learning, but the new educational content "Skola2030" requires that educators strengthen social-emotional learning as one of the goals of education (Zaķe, n.d.).

There are good reasons to be concerned about children's well-being in schools in Latvia - 35% of students reported being bullied at least a few times a month, compared to 23% on average across OECD countries (OECD, 2019). More than one in ten (11%) of 15-year-olds in the Latvian school system said they were frequently bullied, 10% said they were regularly threatened by other students and 12% said they were physically assaulted "at least a few times each month" (European Commission, 2020). The results also do not show high cooperation skills - in Latvia, 53% of students reported that their schoolmates co-operate with each other (OECD average: 62%) (OECD, 2018). A negative attitude of peers toward a teenager undermines his working abilities, the joy of life disappears, and a bad feeling of well-being develops. Mockery hurts and does not give a positive feeling either to those who are mocked or to those who are mocked. Negative behavioral habits during school years can manifest themselves in later life (Špona, 2006, p. 73).

An original social-emotional learning program has been created in Latvia. It is based on generally recognized principles, which exist in other similar programs in the world but is designed according to the Latvian cultural environment. Methodological tool included in the project "School 2030" program was created according to scientific knowledge and approach defined by the new competency-based educational standard (Bērziņa, Martinsone, Niedre, n.d.). As part of the project, a study on the risks of social exclusion was conducted in 25 Latvian schools (Raščevska, Raževa, Martinsone, Tūbele, Vecenlazdāns, Vazne, 2012). The results revealed close relationships between 12-19-year-old students' learning difficulties, impulsivity, aggressive behavior, self-regulation difficulties, anxiety, and social/family factors. Teachers described half of all students as a group of problems (36% - with insufficient academic achievements and 14% - with behavioral and emotional problems) (Martinsone & Niedre, 2013).

The study reports, that in several focus groups the teachers admitted that since the initial implementation of the SEL program, they do not always have time to complete all eight lessons according to the plan (in each school year, 10 SEM hours are planned to be integrated into the work plan for teachers/educators as intended by the program of "Skola2030" (Skola 2030, n.d.) This points to the issue of how to ensure that the SEL ideas become established in the schools' culture outside of the SEL class lesson and brings to the forefront the role of the school administration in integrating the SEL as a crucial part of the school's identity (Martinsone & Vilciņa, 2017).

Theater Art in Latvian school education

A new subject for the personal development of students Theatre Arts (original name Drama) has been applied in Latvia. The increasing need and demand to creatively solve life's problems, to communicate purposefully and confidently in the work environment, and to make courageous decisions in everyday situations require every student to regularly practice public speaking, presentation skills, and purposeful and positive communication. The teaching content of theater art is planned to be integrated into grades 1-3, but from 4th to 9th grade, a certain number of hours are allocated for it (Tamsone, 2018).

The subject of Theatre Arts aims to enable the pupil to learn the language of theatre arts by learning about different performing arts techniques, to get to know the concepts of theatre

art and the most important processes in the development of theater, to develop skills in body plasticity, spoken language, cooperation with the audience, experience the individual and collaborative creative process, creativity, developing self-directed learning, creativity and entrepreneurial abilities, as well as collaborative skills, evaluate new the impact of the work on the audience (Krišāne, Niedre, & Smildziņa, n.d.).

Social- emotional learning in the context of Theater Art

Even understanding the importance and valuable benefits of social-emotional learning it has been a struggle for teachers to implement SEL concepts in their strict and formal curriculum. That is why the arts in general have been proven to be a fruitful way to invoke social-emotional learning (Kriezi, 2023).

Drama can reach students who are not reached through traditional methods (Van de Water, 2020). Drama can be a very effective learning tool for students at risk of poor educational outcomes. It is a way for at risk students to outwardly represent what is happening internally since often these students are not ready or do not know how to verbally express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Drama classes give low-performing students in other subjects the opportunity to take on leadership roles, improving their self-confidence, which in turn can have a positive impact on learning engagement and performance in other subjects, as well as on attitudes towards school in general (Schiller, 2008).

In an interview with the theater director and pedagogue Elmārs Senkovs, Alnis Auziņš (Auziņš, 2019) found out that playing theater can have a similar effect as visiting a psychologist. The student can act out what worries, bothers, or angers them, thereby helping to become aware of the problem, understand its cause, as well as try to find solutions.

By putting the problem on the stage, the pupil can become aware of it and further understand both its causes and possible solutions. In this process, the teacher's intelligence, sensitivity, and knowledge not only of theater but also of psychology play a particularly important role. Other pupils are also involved in the search for a solution to the problem, which allows them to become more empathetic and learn from the mistakes of others. "Theater is worthwhile because it teaches you to get along better, get to know yourself, and learn from different life situations and mistakes made by others. Also, theater teaches that human actions always have certain causes and consequences" (Kraģis, 2022, p. 6). One of the most important terms in theater is "motivation". It is recommended that students empathize with characters who do not represent their views, thus allowing them to delve into and understand the motivations of the "opposite side".

The creators of the Theater Arts subject program expect that the students will choose examples from their own experience, so the teacher must be ready to manage the emotions and solve the individual problems of each student, which may arise in different situations of the learning process (Krišāne, Niedre, & Smildziņa, n.d.). Theater pedagogue Ligita Smildziņa (Smildziņa, 1998) is convinced that a theater arts teacher must work hard on himself, and develop a positive energy in his personality and the ability to give back. She uses methods in her work with children that she claims are in line with group psychotherapy methods.

Idars Kraģis (Kraģis, 2022) also advises teachers to take into account that the most important thing for pupils to learn in the subject of Theater Arts is their awareness of their personality and abilities, as well as the acquisition of communication and interpersonal skills. Recalling that theater arts are not an end in themselves, but a means to acquire these skills.

Konstantin Stanislavsky (Stanislavsky, 1951, p. 26) in his book "Working as an Actor" reveals, that an actor's "main task is not only to depict the external phenomena of the role's life but above all to create on the stage all the plays and the inner life of the person being

portrayed, applying our feelings to this life of a stranger and including in his life all the essential content of our soul".

In primary school (grades 1-3), where the subject of Theatre Arts is integrated into other subjects, topics such as Creating a Fairy Tale, Puppet Theatre, and Masquerade are taught. In the 4th-6th grade, students will study topics such as Etude, Speech, and Opposites (staging an excerpt from a play). In grades 7-9, the subject of Theater Arts includes Improvisation, Production in Process, and Classical Theater Forms (Comedy and Tragedy). In learning about these topics, pupils should develop the habit of being responsible for working together as a team, and respect the creativity and opinions of the teacher and classmates. In addition, to develop the habit of being aware of one's own emotions, interests, and aptitudes and to develop artistic expressions, spontaneity, and empathy (Krišāne, Niedre, & Smildziņa, n.d.).

By linking the objectives of theatre arts to social-emotional learning, based on the "Skola2030" curriculum, the primary teacher should help pupils identify how others feel and try to predict how others might feel in different situations, taking into account facial expressions and body language. They should be encouraged to see commonalities with their peers, to express their personal to learn to accept that others may have different opinions and experiences and that these differences may affect relationships. Children do not yet know how to be empathetic with others and fully understand how their behavior makes others feel (Bērziņa, Martinsone, & Niedre, n.d.). According to Daniel Goleman (2001), a child reaches the highest level of empathy towards adolescence. Empathy is a major influence on future choices - it underpins ethical behavior.

Primary school pupils should already be much more aware that there can be different points of view, be able to express their needs and emotions verbally and be able to work together in a group and deal with conflict situations. In grades 6th - 8th all the above skills should be developed. Students should be asked to be more independent, responsible, decision-making, cooperative, and conflict-resolving. As empathy develops, pupils become increasingly aware of the needs of others, thus reducing the focus on the self. At the end of primary school, the pupil focuses on the development of his or her identity (Bērziņa, Martinsone, & Niedre, n.d.).

By using role-play as a method, real problem situations are successfully imitated, during which, even knowing that the situation is being acted out, children experience real emotions that are similar to real life. By experiencing these situations, the method helps to better understand and delve into the given situation and teaches how to act. Evaluation, experience sharing, and feedback are provided during the game. Children learn to look for answers to unclear questions together and to look for alternative ways of doing things (Engere, Gleške, Kvjatkovska, Šulce, 2014). The role-play method is an effective way of developing the child's personality. It helps the child to control himself, overcome his momentary desires, and look at the situation from the point of view of other people. It is indispensable in overcoming the child's emotional barriers and crises, in understanding new situations, as well as in areas where the exchange of experience is necessary (Engere, Gležke, Kvjatkovska, & Šulce, 2014).

"Creative drama is a broader term covering the terms creative dramatics, role-playing, improvisational drama, and educational drama" (Riazoglu, 2006, p. 116). Creative drama - which is also used as an educational tool – explores behavior and creativity in a safe place. It helps children develop their social skills and improve in academic subjects (Iddon, 2022).

During creative dramatic activities, students learn not to be afraid to make mistakes – there are none in creative drama. This approach liberates students and can improve their attitude towards school. It's a helpful tool not only when working with at-risk students and those with low academic outcomes but also with gifted students who are often afraid to take intellectual risks and make mistakes – creative drama helps them overcome these fears. Creative drama activities teach students to listen to each other, wait their turn, respect each other's personal space, receive immediate feedback, and use it for their development (Cash, 2018).

The choice of text material to perform with students in class is also important. The author of the book "The Development of the Student's Personality - the Main Task of Education" Janis Valbis (Valbis, 2005, p 145) has concluded: "The desire for harmony is closely related to the desire to get to know the cultural heritage. Myths, legends, fairy tales, fables, and novels, both reality and fantasy are important for the development of a person's identity. Moreover, it does not matter how you get to know them - as a film, a book, or a play. They offer role models, challenge and heroism, desirable goals, and a philosophy of life".

It should be noted that it is not important to choose didactic works or to separate characters into "good" and "bad", "heroic" and "coward", but to analyze them more deeply, to try to understand the biography and motivation of each. By working with such an approach, the student will be able to create an interesting role and also develop social-emotional skills.

Drama methods offer invaluable resources that help us to imagine, create, debate, show, and understand what it means to be human (Van de Water, 2020).

Conclusions

The theoretical study allows the author to formulate several conclusions:
1. In theater arts, the ability to cooperate is of great importance - both with a partner, improvising a role play, creating a performance in a team, and with the audience, showing a play or giving a speech (or mono-performance). Successful cooperation requires both the ability to understand oneself and to be understood.
2. The program of the subject Theater Arts introduced in Latvian school education includes improvisation, etude, role plays, cooperation with a partner and audience, self-directed learning, dramatic conflict modeling, using the relationship between people and everyday life observations of situations, etc., that helps students to develop social-emotional skills as well as help in achieving personal and collective goals.
3. In the subject of Theater Arts, students not only express themselves and collaborate, but also set achievable goals in the form of puppet theater, play production, improvisational games, or self-created theater production.
4. Theater arts is based on personal experience, so the teacher must be able to help the student manage his emotions, solving individual problems with each student in different situations of the learning process. It requires the social-emotional competencies of a Theater Arts educator which is one of the most important aspects of teaching social-emotional skills for students.
5. The results of the research show that SEL can be integrated into Theatre Arts lessons and must be implemented also in other subjects as well as in everyday life.

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