Play Therapy: Development, Learning, and Therapy

Embedding Mental, Behavioral Health and Social Emotional Literacy Services into an After Care Program

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Introduction

Nadia Boulanger, who is referred to as music's greatest teacher, said, "Art is the medium in which emotion is expressed" (Robin, 2021). The expression of emotion is a measure of our well-being. As this expression is nurtured and developed, we become in tune with ourselves and others. We can be in harmony with our emotions and the environment. Art provides a stage, a canvas, a story, a poem, a song, a dance, and many other forms of expression as an interpretation of our existence.

In this paper, emotional literacy and its relationship to the arts will be examined. From the individual level to community concepts, these frameworks come together to support children, providing multiple avenues for discovering emotional balance and understanding.

Emotional Literacy and Why It is Important

Emotional literacy is the ability to understand and interpret our own emotional well-being as well as the emotional well-being of those around us. This enables us to acknowledge our emotions

and ask ourselves the question, "How are you doing?" while being fully present to listen to the answer (Orbach, 1999). The development of emotional literacy comes from listening and empathy. This leads to an understanding of our own experienced emotions and a compassion for the emotions of others. This understanding evolves into an emotional language that helps us communicate our feelings succinctly in our own personal power, leading to improvements in our relationships, quality of life, and community (Steiner & Perry, 1997). Our rational and intellectual capacities function to their full potential when we can utilize and manage emotions rather than being consumed by them or acting on them without reflection (Killick, 2006).

Emotional intelligence begins at birth. Babies are born with a range of eight to ten built-in feelings, most of which are apparent within the first few days of life (Holinger, 2009). We enter the world with a built-in structure of emotional literacy that is ready to expand through guidance and cognizance. We have the ability to talk about feelings as soon as we can form a sentence (Steiner, 2003). These existing traits can develop into community-wide emotional literacy.

Emotional aptitude is a meta-ability that regulates how well we function given the skills and mental capacities we possess (Goleman, 1995). Our emotional literacy influences our interactions with others and is essential to learning. It serves as a bridge to connections between people, enabling them to work with their differences and similarities, while also handling any ambiguity and contradiction that may arise (Matthews, 2006).

Ways Emotional Literacy is Taught to Children

Emotional literacy is fundamental to children's growth. Children are being shown how to behave through their interactions with adults. Modeling emotional literacy can build a foundational vernacular for communication. The context of cooperation that exists in adult relationships should also apply to relationships between children and adults. Equality, honesty, and respect are also pillars in relationships with children (Steiner, 2003). The responsibility for supporting and teaching young people, as well as learning from them, is shared by everyone (Park et al., 2003).

In school, teachers and administration can incorporate an awareness of the symptoms of emotional distress in the preschool and elementary years. This will help the organizational structure of these schools to promote the emotional well-being of all children (Koplow, 2002). Westborough High School in England practices emotional literacy with the objective of making sure all students know each other and enjoy working together. This is a momentous task. It is achieved by recognizing that students may have to be challenged to cooperate, but the benefits for the individual and the school require the maximum effort. Based on this effort, Westborough High School has experienced a 30% or more increase in achievement scores (Park et al., 2003). The congruent emotional state helps create a more academic focus.

A whole-school approach to emotional literacy can be woven into the existing curriculum and structure, while also informing all actions and interactions throughout the school and community (Killick, 2006). Students at Westborough are continually encouraged to discuss distress experienced in and out of school. A former teacher at Westborough said, "If there is a problem, it is talked about and dealt with. Things are never allowed to become issues." Discrimination is not

tolerated, and methods are developed to foster collaboration through differences, enabling students to learn the importance of respecting each other's cultures (Park et al., 2003).

The city of Southampton is prioritizing emotional literacy for all children, aiming to achieve community-wide success. Educational Psychologists worked with school administrators and the Education Services Chief Inspector to first consider their own emotional literacy. Once that was determined, they analyzed how the community could work together to support and share communal emotional literacy across the entire city (Sharp, 2000).

Communities focused on consciously shared emotional literacy showcase opportunities to explore emotions through songs, poems, games, theatre, art, performance, and writing. Storytelling contributes to children's vocabulary growth, listening skills, emotional recognition, and self-esteem by showing relatable emotions and experiences through characters (Figueroa-Sanchez, 2008). In group involvement, children develop important cognitive skills by engaging in interactions and teamwork with both children and adults. Observational participation also encourages emotional growth, and art provides a vast opportunity for emotional engagement.

In children, emotional literacy can also be procured by picture books. Children may not know how to verbalize that someone is sad or happy in a specific context, but they will respond to an illustration of these emotions. Picture books often focus on emotions such as joy, distress, fear, and anger, which are emotions closely tied to empathy (Nikolajeva, 2013). The illustrations in books produce a context for feelings that words cannot fully emote. The premise of Bibliotherapy is that books can provide the information, guidance, and solace that we need for support. Books are referred to as "medicine for the soul" (McNicol, 2018). These book-focused therapies offer a lens through which to view emotions from different perspectives, which can help mitigate their emotional impact, provide education, and foster understanding.

Creative activities from multiple disciplines are essential in developing competencies such as relationship building, self-discipline, and decision-making. These creative activities may include writing, drawing, theater, music, or artistic expression, creating opportunities for students to learn problem-solving skills, communication, and deeper self-expression. These activities further develop students' cognitive functioning and emotional regulation (Stanley et al., 2024).

Literature Review

The development of emotional literacy is essential to emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence guides our awareness towards the roles our emotions play in our environments and the way these emotions are expressed in society (Brackett et al., 2006). People who have developed skills related to emotional intelligence understand and express their own emotions, recognize emotions in others, regulate affect, and use moods and emotions to motivate adaptive behaviors (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process by which students develop and grow in their capacity to acquire developmental skills that enable them to succeed in school and in life (Muller et al., 2024). SEL helps students develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others by enhancing their social and emotional skills, including prosocial interactions and positive

relationships. It also reduces emotional distress and conduct problems by increasing a student's emotional literacy level.

Emotional literacy helps students understand and relate to one another. When students can express themselves in group discussions designed to promote positive experiences, they can develop well-rounded self-concepts (Lotecka, 1974). This deepens our understanding of social interactions and fosters a sense of communal association with others. Emotional literacy refers to the ability to understand one's own emotional experiences (Nixon, 2016). School director Karen Stone McCown said, "Our kids learn that you always have choices about how you respond to emotion, and the more ways you know to respond to an emotion, the richer your life can be" (Goleman, 1995). Direct communication about emotions normalizes the process of feelings that we all experience. The visual arts offer an opportunity to provide time and space for children to reflect on their emotional experiences and interactions in social settings. The arts provide a safe and supportive space to explore and communicate a student's hopes, dreams, fears, and goals.

The resources and benefits of emotional literacy are available and beneficial to adults as well. Emotional literacy can be reconstructed in individuals who have experienced trauma. Imagery used in psychotherapy helps clients open up to the possibility of discoveries on both metaphorical and sensory levels. Relaxation techniques accompanied by emotional imagery cards build vocabulary to describe emotions and process traumatic events (Bayne & Thompson, 2018).

Predictors of depression in older adults can be evaluated by examining their emotional management, and how one's emotionality could become more positive by reframing perceptions that enable depression (Lloyd et al., 2012). Fernandez-Berrocal (2006) conducted a study with 250 high-school students to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence, anxiety, self-esteem, and depression. The study revealed that the ability to repair emotional states was positively related to self-esteem, the ability to discriminate clearly among feelings, and regulating emotional states was a predictor of lower anxiety and depression.

Expressive Arts Therapy, Art Therapy, and Multi-Modal Approaches to Programming

The arts serve as a language to communicate and educate about emotional literacy, offering endless opportunities for emotional exploration and growth. The American Journal of Public Health (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010) conducted a review of research to analyze the relationship between art and healing. They found that the tested modalities of music engagement, visual arts, movement-based creative expression, and expressive writing proved successful in reducing anxiety, stress, and mood disturbances.

Creative arts therapy encompasses various modalities, as outlined by the National Coalition of Creative Arts Therapies Association (2020), including art therapy, dance and movement therapy, drama therapy, music therapy, and poetry therapy. These therapeutic activities can alleviate or mitigate the effects of traumatic experiences by engaging multiple senses simultaneously, while facilitating connection with inner feelings and unconscious thoughts (Perryman et al., 2019).

The International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA) (2020) views expressive arts as a combination of performance, visual arts, movement, drama, music, writing, and other creative processes to explore personal growth and community development. IEATA recommends an evolving, multi-modal approach that utilizes psychology, community arts, and education to foster positive growth. The arts are a broad medium, so the multi-modal approach encourages integration with an extensive range of approaches that build on the artistic strengths and interests of the individual and organization.

The American Art Therapy Association (2020) views art therapy as an opportunity to engage the mind, body, and spirit in ways that are distinct and not accessible through verbal articulation alone. Personal expression enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities by combining the creative processes of applied psychological theory with the human experience in a psychotherapeutic relationship. Kinesthetic, sensory, perceptual, and symbolic methods invite alternative modes of receptive and expressive communication.

The use of music as therapy dates back to the origins of music. Music therapy is the clinical and evidence-based use of music within a therapeutic relationship to address the physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of individuals (American Music Therapy Association, 2020). Music is a sensory-based technique that accesses and stimulates specific areas of the cerebral cortex, as well as their relationship to emotion. If music is to be considered a language it is one of healing (Trimble & Hesdorffer, 2017).

Drama therapy is an interactive framework that utilizes storytelling, projective play, purposeful improvisation, role-playing, witnessing, and performance to achieve therapeutic goals (North American Drama Therapy Association, 2020). Drama therapy incorporates different forms of expression and observation. Modalities can be organized according to individual or group needs, as well as personal interests. The focus is on curating an active, experiential practice that allows both the participant and observer to gain therapeutic insight.

Artistic expression personifies the experiences, relationships, aspirations, regrets, successes, and traumas that the artist has lived through (Edgar & Elias, 2021). The arts provide a gateway for learning more about oneself and the world around them while expressing deep emotions and experiences.

Arts Programming in Social Work

Nicholas Mazza, the founder of the Journal for Poetry Therapy, says, "It is important to recognize that social work is an art. The arts offer the means to reach and validate clients by allowing them to, 'tell their stories' in a variety of ways, that is a respectful and strengths-based approach" (Jackson, 2015). The profession of social work has been built from a deep need for social imagination. According to Glowacki (2004), the Hull House co-founders included in their pursuit to, "uphold the right of all to art and conditions of daily life that could feed the creative impulse."

Portland State University's social work department adopted a community-based approach by bringing together social work students and art students to collaborate on problem-solving and

exploring how social workers and artists approach societal issues. By examining how each discipline approaches solving a problem, the social worker and the artist collaboratively educate each other and grow from the different perspectives on the same issue (Ortega, 2019).

A study was conducted with a group of 45 students using school-based art therapy to draw portraits over the course of three years. The students shared their progress, stating that drawing the portraits provided an outlet for expression, openness, and instilled self-confidence, while also helping them cope with anger, sadness, and stress (McDonald et al., 2019).

Theatre activities, storytelling, and participatory video have been shown to be effective coping mechanisms for stress and as a tool to develop hope for adolescents who have been affected by war (Mitchell et al., 2019). An applied theatre study conducted in Spain demonstrated the effectiveness of combining theatre with one-on-one sessions as a powerful tool in social work, fostering the development of individual, group, and community capacities among homeless individuals (Muñoz-Bellerín & Cordero-Ramos, 2020).

Photography can be applied as an outlet for reflection and expression. In Canada, an art-based project was done using photography to build collages for refugee children to share their stories. The photography collages were an empowerment exercise to build a here and now expression for the children based on their home life, school, classrooms, after-school care programs, parks, and neighborhoods (Yohani, 2008).

Mogro-Wilson and Tredinnick (2020) looked at the use of combining a SEL curriculum with a visual art and music curriculum for high school students. The study provided further evidence supporting the use of SEL and the arts as practical tools to increase positive behaviors, enhance school success, and reduce aggression in students.

Arts programming can have a dramatic effect on the social work framework. Arts and SEL related research can contribute to a vast number of contemporary health challenges and build robust evidence-based programming into the field (Travis et al., 2019).

Methods

Participants/ Setting

Participants included 24 children and youth in an after-school program hosted by a local theatre group in Memphis, Tennessee. The ages of the children range from 8 to 13, and the demographic makeup included 21 African American children and 3 Hispanic children. The gender of participants included 15 females and 9 males.

Intervention & Materials Needed

This intervention was a 6-week group-based intervention with daily sessions across the week that ran for 45–60 minutes, utilizing various forms of expressive-arts activities (visual arts, music, movement, drama, creative writing) mapped to specific SEL domains (self-control, thankfulness, peace, gentleness, love, and patience). A facilitation and program manual was provided, along

with session guides that included objectives, materials, timed activities, and debrief prompts, all of which linked artmaking to SEL concepts. All research assistants, who ran the group intervention, were trained to 100% fidelity prior to starting the groups. A two-hour facilitator training was provided and covered the topics of arts facilitation, SEL, trauma-informed practices, and fidelity procedures.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether an expressive-arts afterschool program focusing on SEL increases children's and youths' social–emotional skills and yields high participant satisfaction.

The following are the research questions posed for this work:

Knowledge Gain: Do SEL domain/skill scores increase from pre- to post, across participants?
     H1: Mean posttest > mean pretest (within participants).

Satisfaction: Are youth satisfied with the expressive-arts SEL activities?
     H2: Mean satisfaction ≥ pre-specified benchmark (e.g., ≥4 on 1–5 scale).

This study utilized a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest within-subjects design in an after-school program serving elementary through middle school youth across one or multiple sites.

Data Collection

Data collection included pre- and post-test skill-based assessments on the attainment of SEL skills across identified domains following each weekly SEL topic. A Likert scale (1, 2, 3) was used to determine, after each SEL skill was trained, whether the youth felt that they had improved in that skill/domain (pretest) or if they had increased their skill (posttest), assessed before and after the training. (1= not at all, 2= sometimes, and 3= always.) The domains of SEL assessed included the following skills: self-control, thankfulness, peace, gentleness, love, and patience.

A final social validity assessment was completed at the final session to determine the level of satisfaction in participation in the intervention. The Child Intervention Rating Profile (CIRP) was used for the posttest social validity measure. This is a 5-point Likert scale, indicating the respondent's level of satisfaction with the intervention. The CIRP that was used for this study (Turco & Elliot; 1986a) was adapted from an earlier version (Witt & Martens; 1983). The CIRP is a 7-item instrument on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, 1, to Strongly Agree, 5). Three of the items were reversed. The maximum score is 35. A higher score indicates a higher positive perception and acceptability of the intervention. The CIRP has been found to have good validity and reliability (Turco & Elliot; 1986a; 1986b).

Results and Findings

Results indicated that across all 24 participants, their reported increase in the SEL skill across domains improved after each of the training sessions concluded.

Average Pre and Posttest Scores of Youth for 6 SEL Domains
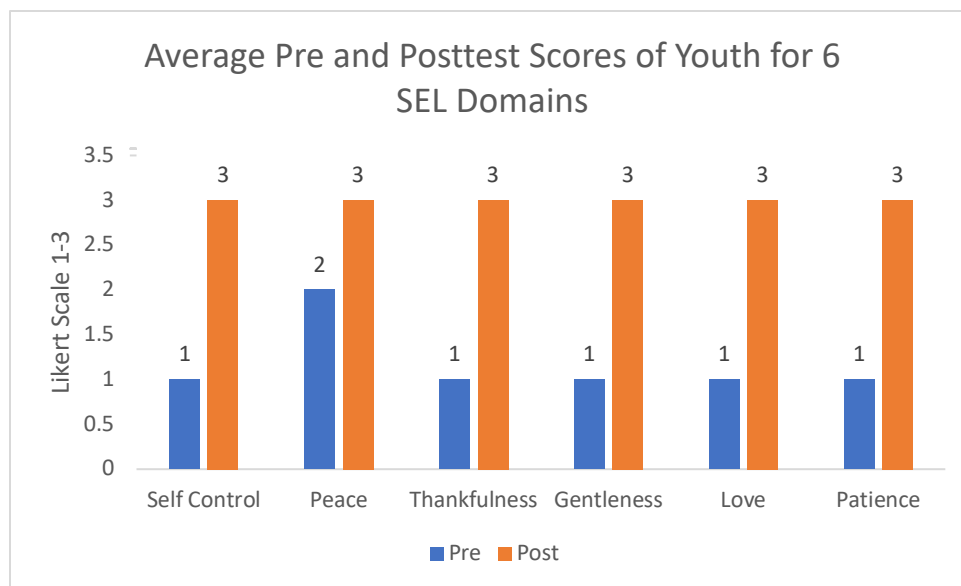
The results of the CIRP also indicated that all 24 participants appreciated the use of the expressive arts intervention in the program to address the need for the development of SEL. The CIRP asks students questions about their perceptions of the intervention and whether they will be impacted by it. The posttest data indicated that all 24 respondents (100%) found the intervention to be very helpful and would recommend it to their peers.

Discussion

Limitations/ Future Implications

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several important limitations. First, the relatively small sample size limits statistical power, reducing the ability to detect true effects and increasing the potential influence of individual outliers on the results. With fewer participants, estimates of mean scores, effect sizes, and correlations are less stable, and confidence intervals are wider, resulting in more uncertain precision of the findings. The small sample also constrains the ability to examine outcomes across subgroups, such as grade level or gender, and reduces the generalizability of results to broader populations.

Second, the absence of a comparison group prevents strong causal conclusions. Without a group of similar youth who did not participate in the program, it is not possible to determine whether observed improvements in social–emotional knowledge were the result of the expressive-arts intervention or due to other factors, such as natural developmental changes, exposure to related content in school, or testing effects from seeing similar questions twice. External events occurring during the study period could also have influenced the results (historical effects), and statistical phenomena such as regression to the mean may explain a portion of the gains. In

addition, the voluntary nature of participation introduces the possibility of self-selection bias, whereby youth who chose to participate may differ in motivation or baseline skills from those who did not.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that the current results should be viewed as exploratory. While they provide preliminary evidence of the program's potential to enhance social–emotional knowledge, further research using larger samples and a comparison group is needed to attribute observed gains to the intervention itself more confidently.

Conclusion

Combining mental health, behavioral health, SEL, and the arts into programming for children and youth has the potential to impact students now and into the future by providing avenues for self-expression, increasing emotional literacy, processing trauma, and reducing aggressive or depressive symptoms. Arts programs provide a way for complicated feelings to be expressed and understood. This is vital to the overall well-being of children, youth, and adults, as we are all emotional beings, seeking to understand and be understood.

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