

Theatre as a Modality for Socioemotional Learning in Children from Urban Slums: A Case Report from Gurgaon, India

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Received: 12-08-2025

Accepted: 15-09-2025

How to cite this article:

Bhartiya S, Krishna RV G, Dorairaj E. Theatre as a Modality for Socioemotional Learning in Children from Urban Slums: A Case Report from Gurgaon, India. *Int J Adv Integ Med Sci* 2024;9(3):1-3.

Source of Support: Nil,

Conflicts of Interest: None declared.

ABSTRACT

Background: Socioemotional learning (SEL) equips children with resilience, empathy, and decision-making skills. Children in urban slums face compounded psychosocial stressors that hinder such development. Theatre pedagogy provides an embodied, participatory modality for SEL.

Methods: This case report describes a ten-session applied theatre intervention conducted in two after-school clubs for children (n=78, ages 6–15) in the urban slums of Gurgaon, India. Sessions were sequentially structured to build trust, identity, empathy, role-play, and collaborative storytelling. Outcomes were assessed through educator field notes and observation.

Results: Children demonstrated a clear developmental arc: moving from initial hesitancy to confident improvisation and collaborative play-making. Trust-building games enhanced rapport and non-verbal communication; identity exploration fostered self-expression; role-play strengthened empathy and social awareness; while ensemble-based play development promoted negotiation, responsibility, and teamwork. Observable outcomes included increased spontaneous articulation, greater physical and narrative sophistication, improved collaboration, and the emergence of empathy through embodied perspective-taking.

Conclusion: Applied theatre is a culturally adaptable, feasible modality for SEL in marginalized children. It bypasses literacy barriers, fosters socioemotional competencies, and holds promise for integration into early childcare and development in low-resource settings. Rigorous mixed-method evaluations are warranted to strengthen evidence.

Keywords: Socioemotional Learning, Applied Theatre, Drama Therapy, Urban Health, Children, India

BACKGROUND

Socioemotional learning (SEL) equips children with the skills to build resilience, manage emotions, establish healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions. For children in urban slums, where poverty, deprivation, use of harsh punishments and overcrowding exacerbate psychosocial stressors, SEL is especially critical.^{1 2 3 4 5 6}

Conventional education in such contexts often prioritizes foundational literacy and numeracy, leaving gaps in psychosocial development. Theatre-based interventions, especially the liberal progressivism of drama pedagogy, provide embodied, participatory methods that allow children to explore emotions and identities through play, improvisation, and role-play.

This report describes the design, implementation, and observed outcomes of a ten-session applied theatre program for children from the urban slums of Gurgaon, India.

CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

The Theatre for SEL workshops were held in two Vision Unlimited After School Clubs in the urban slums of Gurgaon, India, over six weeks. The duration of each of these workshops varied from 90 to 120 minutes, depending on the children's participation. The sessions were facilitated by an experienced drama educator, trained in liberal drama pedagogy, especially for SEL. All enrolled children were invited to participate; 78 attended consistently (ages 6–15), with varied educational backgrounds and literacy levels.

INTERVENTION

The ten-session curriculum was sequentially structured to build SEL competencies (Table 1). The core components of the program included social skills, identifying others' feelings, identifying one's own feelings, and behavioral coping skills/relaxation to help build resilience.⁷

Table 1: Session-wise Details of the Theatre SEL Intervention (January–May 2025)

| Date | Theme / Focus | SEL Domain(s) Targeted | Key Activities | Observed Outcomes |
|--------|----------------------------|---|--|---|
| 11 Jan | Rapport building | Relationship skills, self-management | Walk-Stop-Statue, team shapes, tableaux | Comfort in group, spatial awareness, improved ensemble dynamics |
| 18 Jan | Trust and Hope | Social awareness, relationship skills | Partner maze (eyes closed), group trust exercises | Greater trust, reliance, verbal/non-verbal clarity |
| 25 Jan | Identity & Self-Expression | Self-awareness | Identity zones, statues of roles, imagination island | Reflection on identity, creative thinking, abstract role-play |
| 1 Feb | Continuation: Identity | Self-awareness, leadership | Character-building, leader-detection, improvisation | Detailed profiles, observation, confidence in role-play |
| 15 Feb | Exploring Identity | Self-awareness, responsible decision-making | Hot-seating, reflection on identity words | Spontaneous articulation, active listening, self-reflection |
| 23 Feb | Role-play & Storytelling | Social awareness, relationship skills | Market scenes, group storytelling, mini-performances | Teamwork, audience-performer etiquette, diverse character roles |
| 9 Mar | Sculpture-making | Self-management, creativity | Human sculptures, tableaux | Expressive images, collaborative creation, narrative seeds |
| 27 Apr | Sculptures → Stories | Creativity, collaboration | Revisiting sculptures, group storytelling | Cohesive storylines, ensemble imagination, improvisation |
| 4 May | Improvisation & Ensemble | Relationship skills, collaboration | Mirror exercise, improvisational scenes | Ensemble trust, non-verbal communication, confident performance |
| 11 May | Play Development | Responsible decision-making, teamwork | Linking scenes, transitions, collective rehearsal | Ownership, negotiation, collective narrative building |

- **Sessions 1–2 (Foundation):** Trust-building and non-verbal communication through mirroring, maze navigation, and group formations.
- **Sessions 3–4 (Exploration):** Internal reflection through drawing/writing and expression of identity.
- **Sessions 5–6 (Application):** Hot-seating, market role-play, and collaborative storytelling to enhance spontaneity, empathy, and teamwork.
- **Sessions 7–10 (Integration):** Physical sculptures transformed into narratives; improvisation into play-building; culminating in the development of a collective theatrical performance.

OBSERVED OUTCOMES

Across ten theatre-based sessions, children demonstrated progressive acquisition of SEL competencies. Themes emerging from educator observation are mapped below to the SEL framework domains.

SELF-AWARENESS

Children moved from initial hesitancy to spontaneous self-expression. Identity-based exercises (drawings, statues, storytelling) encouraged reflection on self and personal roles. Hot-seating activities strengthened their ability to speak confidently about themselves and their imagined identities.

SOCIAL AWARENESS

Trust-building activities (blindfolded navigation, human maze, cooperative formations) helped children embody reliance and empathy. Market role-play and group storytelling enhanced recognition of diverse social roles and interdependence.

SELF-MANAGEMENT

Physical theatre techniques (tableaux, statues, mirroring) promoted impulse control, patience, and focus. Over time, children sustained attention through complex improvisations and rehearsal sequences.

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Theatre demanded listening, negotiation, and collaboration. By Sessions 7–10, students collectively structured narratives, decided transitions, and rehearsed collaboratively. Ensemble games deepened rapport and mutual respect.

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

Play-building required choices about storylines, character development, and group direction. Students engaged in collaborative decision-making, conflict resolution, and negotiation, demonstrating emerging responsibility.

DEVELOPMENTAL ARC

The intervention's trajectory moved from embodied trust and non-verbal collaboration, through identity exploration and role-play, to complex group storytelling and play development. The most consistent observed outcomes were:

- Increased confidence in public performance and spontaneous articulation.
- Improved empathy and perspective-taking.
- Strengthened teamwork and ensemble responsibility.
- Greater sophistication in physical and narrative expression.

DISCUSSION

Early childhood is a period of rapid physical, mental and socio-emotional development. The latter includes emotional expression and regulation skills, relational capacities with those their age and older, as well as learning about their immediate environments.⁸ Holistic, creative, and play-based SEL supports are therefore an integral part of early childcare and development. Of these, drama based pedagogy allow children to explore emotions and identities, fostering their socioemotional competencies.⁹⁻¹²

This is especially imperative for children in resource poor setting like urban slums, where poverty exacerbates psychosocial stressors, and can potentially retard their overall development.¹³⁻¹⁸ These stressors include paucity of resources, poor parenting, exposure to violence and harsh punishments, as well as abuse. Classroom SEL provides them to tools for expression, build resilience, and help them explore emotions and identities. This may also have long term psychosocial benefits: decreased behavioural problems, improved academic performance and social adaptation, resulting in better health and social skills.

While conventional education and early childcare initiatives usually prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy, they rarely focus on the ecological integration of SEL frameworks in the classroom. The Theatre for CSEL initiative in two Vision Unlimited After School Clubs in the urban slums of Gurgaon, has demonstrated that the intervention results in increased spontaneous articulation and confidence, as well an improvement in collaboration and collective decision-making. These, along with emergence of empathy through embodied perspective-taking means not only better self-expression, but may also foster healthier relationships, and social support structures. For a child vulnerable to neglect and abuse, these can have a long lasting, perhaps even an inter-generational impact.

Our findings echo systematic reviews and meta-analyses demonstrating that drama interventions improve creativity, self-expression, empathy, and social competence in school-aged children.¹⁹ Several recent meta-analyses indicate that universal SEL interventions are effective in improving a broad array of outcomes, including social skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance.^{20,21}

During pretend-play creativity is enhanced through the act of performing narrative situations (enactment), enabling the development of perspective, divergent thinking, and problem solving. Storytelling helps the development of divergent thinking and imagination, while transforming reality helps develop perspective and empathy.^{22,23} Theatre's embodied and play-based methods bypass literacy barriers, making it especially suited for heterogeneous low-resource classrooms.

This case illustrates the feasibility of applied theatre for SEL in marginalized children. The developmental arc from embodied trust exercises to complex verbal and narrative expression reflects SEL's staged acquisition of self- and social competencies.

Our observations align with prior studies reporting positive effects of drama pedagogy on children's empathy, communication, and peer relationships. Theatre's embodied, play-based approach bypassed literacy barriers, echoing findings that drama interventions can be particularly effective in heterogeneous, low-resource settings.

A major limitation of our case report is that the outcomes were based on teacher observation without standardized assessment; and that the heterogeneous age group limited age-specific tailoring. Nevertheless, the intervention was safe, well-attended, and contextually resonant.

CONCLUSION

Applied theatre is a promising, culturally adaptable modality for socioemotional learning in marginalized children. This case demonstrates a developmental arc from non-verbal trust exercises to confident collaborative play-making, suggesting its potential to foster psychosocial development in resource-poor contexts. Rigorous mixed-method evaluation, longer interventions, and facilitator training for local staff are recommended.

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