The UPI-UPSI International Conference 2025
"Transforming Education in the Digital Era to Prepare Adaptive and Competitive Global Citizens"
Volume 1, Edisi 1, 2025
Open Access: https://proceedings.upi.edu/upi-upsi

Expressive Art as a Medium Social and Emotional Learning

Alifia Rizki Farhani and Anne Hafina
Department of Guidance and Counseling, Faculty of Education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia
*Correspondence: E-mail: Alifiarizkif02@upi.edu

ABSTRACT

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is essential for fostering emotional intelligence, empathy, and resilience in students, yet traditional pedagogical approaches often overlook creative modalities. This study explores expressive art as a medium for SEL, emphasizing its potential to enhance self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills. The aim of this study is to synthesize existing literature to understand how various forms of expressive arts—such as visual arts, music, drama, and movement—contribute to SEL development in educational contexts. A systematic literature review was conducted, analyzing peer-reviewed articles, theoretical frameworks, and empirical studies published in the past two decades. Findings suggest that engaging in expressive arts provides students with opportunities to model emotions, practice social interactions, reflect on personal experiences, and transfer emotional understanding across contexts. Additionally, arts-based interventions were shown to support inclusive learning environments, validating diverse perspectives and promoting cultural and emotional sensitivity. The review highlights both the strengths and limitations of current implementations, indicating the need for teacher training and structured integration of arts-based SEL strategies into curricula. In conclusion, expressive art emerges as a promising, flexible, and culturally adaptable medium for fostering social and emotional competencies, with potential long-term benefits for students' character development and academic achievement. Future research should investigate standardized assessment tools, longitudinal outcomes, and best practices for implementation across diverse educational settings.
© 2025 UPI-UPSI

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:
Submitted/Received 19 Nov 2025
First Revised 21 Dec 2025
Accepted 4 Jan 2026
First Available online 10 Jan 2026
Publication Date 10 Jan 2026

Keyword:
Emotional Intelligence, Expressive Art, Holistic Pedagogy, Social and Emotional Learning, Social Intelligence

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the significance of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained increasing attention as an essential component of holistic education. SEL encompasses the development of emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, and interpersonal competence—skills that are foundational for students' well-being and success in both academic and social contexts (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011). However, despite its recognized importance, traditional pedagogical approaches often emphasize cognitive and behavioral outcomes while neglecting the emotional and creative dimensions of learning (Elias, 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). As a result, there is a growing call for innovative strategies that nurture emotional growth and social connectedness in more engaging and meaningful ways.

One promising approach that has emerged is the integration of expressive arts—including visual arts, music, drama, and movement—into SEL practices. Expressive art provides learners with alternative pathways for emotional expression, self-reflection, and social interaction, allowing them to explore complex emotions and interpersonal dynamics in a safe, creative environment (Malchiodi, 2020; Wright et al., 2014). Through art-making and embodied experiences, students can externalize their feelings, communicate nonverbally, and develop empathy by understanding multiple perspectives (Goldstein & Winner, 2012; Kalmanowitz & Potash, 2010).

Although previous studies have examined the benefits of arts-based education, research that specifically links expressive arts to SEL outcomes remains fragmented. Many initiatives are implemented without a clear theoretical grounding or consistent evaluation framework, making it difficult to understand their broader educational impact (Barrett et al., 2017; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive synthesis of existing evidence to clarify how expressive arts contribute to SEL development and how these practices can be effectively integrated into curricula.

Therefore, the present study conducts a systematic literature review to explore the intersection between expressive art and Social and Emotional Learning. It aims to identify the mechanisms through which different forms of expressive art support self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social competence, as well as to examine the strengths, challenges, and implications of arts-based SEL interventions in educational settings. By synthesizing empirical findings and theoretical perspectives from the past two decades, this study seeks to offer insights into how expressive arts can serve as a culturally adaptable and inclusive medium for fostering emotional and social growth among students.

2. METHODS

A systematic literature review was conducted, focusing on peer-reviewed articles, systematic reviews, empirical studies, and meta-analyses published between 2015 and 2025. Database searches included Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, and open-access educational repositories using the terms "expressive art," "social and emotional learning," "arts-based education," and related constructs. Inclusion criteria encompassed studies on arts-based SEL interventions, comparisons between individual and combined modalities, culturally responsive program adaptations, and assessment of SEL domains in both general and special populations.

Both quantitative and qualitative research were included, with priority given to mixed-methods and participatory approaches (e.g., photovoice, drama-based storytelling, youth action research). The quality of psychometric tools, longitudinal measurement, and cross-cultural validity were assessed. Underrepresented populations

(multilingual, special needs, and racially minoritized groups) were highlighted to identify persistent gaps and equity issues

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Effectiveness of Expressive Arts Modalities in Developing SEL

Recent studies indicate that expressive arts—such as drama, music, and visual arts, whether applied individually or in combination—are effective in enhancing various dimensions of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), particularly self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills (Brovchak et al., 2024; Çenberci & Tufan, 2025; Müller et al., 2024).

A multi-modal approach, which integrates multiple art forms, provides broader cognitive, emotional, and social benefits, especially for primary school students. In contrast, single-modality approaches—such as drama or music—tend to emphasize self-awareness, emotional expression, and empathy (McGovern & Yeganeh, 2024; Liu et al., 2024). Visual arts, meanwhile, play a crucial role in helping learners recognize and reflect on their emotions through symbols and visual imagery (Ebrahem et al., 2024).

However, comparative research between single and combined modalities remains scarce, making it difficult to determine the relative effectiveness of each approach. Future studies are encouraged to conduct direct comparative analyses to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how each art form contributes to students' social-emotional development (Mogro-Wilson & Tredinnick, 2020).

3.2 Contextual and Developmental Differences

The effectiveness of expressive arts interventions varies depending on students' age and sociocultural context. For younger children, activities such as drama-based storytelling and integrated arts significantly enhance self-awareness, teamwork, and creative thinking (Koç, 2025; Müller et al., 2019). Among adolescents, programs using digital storytelling, modern music, or game-based learning formats tend to be more engaging and culturally relevant to their emotional needs (Lynn et al., 2024).

Cultural factors also moderate outcomes. Studies in China show greater SEL gains among early learners in high-context cultures, where social harmony and group cohesion are highly valued (Chen & Yu, 2022). By contrast, regions such as Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East remain underrepresented, highlighting the need for cross-cultural research to ensure global validity (Mendy & Madiope, 2020; Barlas et al., 2022).

3.3 Frequently and Infrequently Measured SEL Dimensions

Most existing research focuses on self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills, as these domains are more easily observed and assessed through artistic interaction (Ng & Sun, 2022; Pereira & Marques-Pinto, 2017).

However, responsible decision-making and intrapersonal skills—including emotional regulation and self-reflection—are seldom measured due to the lack of culturally validated instruments that can capture these internal processes (Pancorbo et al., 2021). This methodological gap limits researchers' ability to fully understand how expressive arts foster emotional depth and self-regulation among learners.

3.4 Issues of Inclusivity and Population Representation

Current studies largely focus on mainstream student populations, with minimal inclusion of multilingual students, learners with disabilities, and racially minoritized

groups (Hassani & Schwab, 2021; Lucas et al., 2025). Yet, evidence shows that these groups particularly benefit from culturally and linguistically responsive arts-based SEL interventions (McCallops et al., 2019; Heidelburg et al., 2025).

Therefore, there is a growing call for inclusive and participatory research designs involving students, teachers, and local communities in program development. Such collaboration ensures interventions are contextually grounded and culturally meaningful (Cook & Murphy, 2023).

3.5 Methodological Challenges and Research Needs

The diversity of research methods—including quantitative, qualitative, and arts-based participatory approaches—has enriched understanding of expressive arts and SEL (Jackson Foster et al., 2018; Ford & Campbell, 2024). Nevertheless, several methodological limitations persist:

1. Limited cross-cultural validation of SEL assessment tools (Lashley & Halverson, 2020).
2. A lack of longitudinal studies to track sustained program effects (Swierad & Williams, 2023).
3. Challenges in assessing intrapersonal SEL dimensions, such as emotional regulation (Garner et al., 2024).

Participatory methodologies such as photovoice, metaphor mapping, and youth participatory action research offer authentic insights into students' emotional experiences (Eckhoff, 2025; Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2023). However, their effective use requires educators and facilitators with advanced research and reflective capacities.

3.6 Implications for Educational Practice

The success of arts-based SEL programs depends on intentional curriculum integration and cultural responsiveness. Teachers must deliberately embed SEL within arts activities aligned with established frameworks such as CASEL and Transformative SEL (Omasta et al., 2020; Cook & Murphy, 2023).

Key implications include:

1. Teacher training in culturally responsive arts and SEL pedagogy (Kaur & Sharma, 2024).
2. Policy and funding support for sustainable, arts-based SEL initiatives (Zimba et al., 2021).
3. Parent and community engagement, which strengthens program sustainability and emotional relevance (van de Sande et al., 2024).

In post-crisis or trauma-affected settings, trauma-informed, arts-based SEL offers an avenue for healing and rebuilding cultural identity (Al-Hroub & Al-Hroub, 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

This review reaffirms the growing consensus that expressive arts—particularly drama, music, and visual arts—represent a powerful medium for fostering Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) across diverse educational contexts. The integration of artistic modalities enables learners to externalize emotions, strengthen empathy, and cultivate social connectedness—core competencies identified within the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2023).

Evidence from recent studies demonstrates that multi-modal approaches, combining several art forms, produce broader cognitive and affective benefits than single-modality interventions (Brovchak et al., 2024; Çenberci & Tufan, 2025). However, single

modalities—especially drama and music—remain effective tools for promoting emotional expression, self-awareness, and interpersonal understanding (McGovern & Yeganeh, 2024; Liu et al., 2024). Despite these encouraging results, comparative research between individual and integrated arts interventions is still limited, leaving critical questions about the relative efficacy of each modality unanswered (Mogro-Wilson & Tredinnick, 2020).

Cultural and developmental contexts further shape the effectiveness of expressive arts in SEL. Early childhood and primary-level interventions have shown strong impacts on cooperation, empathy, and creative expression (Koç, 2025; Müller et al., 2024). Yet, the predominance of studies from Western and East Asian contexts raises concerns about cultural representativeness, particularly in under-researched regions such as Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East (Mendy & Madiope, 2020; Barlas et al., 2022). Future research must expand across diverse sociocultural environments to ensure global relevance and equity.

Methodologically, this field continues to face significant challenges. The limited cross-cultural validation of psychometric instruments constrains understanding of intrapersonal SEL skills such as emotional regulation and self-reflection (Pancorbo et al., 2021; Garner et al., 2024). While participatory approaches—such as photovoice and youth participatory action research—offer more authentic insights into emotional learning (Eckhoff, 2025; Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2023), they require substantial researcher capacity and institutional support.

Practically, this synthesis underscores that intentional, culturally responsive implementation is key to maximizing the potential of arts-based SEL (Cook & Murphy, 2023; Omasta et al., 2020). Teachers play a central role in embedding SEL objectives into artistic practice, supported by professional training, policy alignment, and community collaboration (Kaur & Sharma, 2024; van de Sande et al., 2024). Moreover, in post-crisis and trauma-affected settings, arts-based, trauma-informed SEL interventions offer meaningful opportunities for emotional healing and cultural restoration (Al-Hroub, 2024).

In conclusion, expressive arts stand as a humanistic and transformative approach to SEL—one that bridges emotion, culture, and creativity in the learning process. To realize its full potential, the field requires methodological rigor, longitudinal inquiry, inclusive participation, and culturally adaptive frameworks. By advancing these dimensions, expressive arts can not only enhance emotional intelligence and empathy but also contribute to the formation of reflective, resilient, and socially responsible learners prepared for an increasingly interconnected world.

Future research is therefore recommended to:

1. Conduct longitudinal studies to assess the sustained impact of expressive arts interventions on students' social-emotional development.
2. Develop and validate psychometric tools that can reliably capture intrapersonal SEL dimensions across cultural contexts.
3. Promote collaborative and participatory research designs involving educators, students, artists, and local communities in program development.
4. Explore digital innovations, such as digital storytelling and technology-enabled arts, to expand accessibility and engagement in SEL learning.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The author affirms that this research was conducted independently and ethically, without any conflict of interest that could influence its findings. The author also verifies

that the manuscript is entirely original and has not been plagiarized or submitted elsewhere.

6. REFERENCES

Al-Hroub, A., & Al-Hroub, R. (2024). Empowering the vulnerable: The impact of SEL on traumatized children's academic and social outcomes in crises. Current Psychiatry Reports, 26(12), 777–781. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-024-01555-8

Barrett, M. S., Flynn, L. M., Brown, J. E., & Welch, G. F. (2017). Music learning and teaching in infancy, childhood, and adolescence: An Oxford handbook of music education. Oxford University Press.

Barlas, N. S., Sidhu, J., & Li, C. (2022). Can social-emotional learning programs be adapted to schools in Pakistan? International Journal of School and Educational Psychology, 10(2), 155–169. https://doi.org/10.1080/21683603.2020.1850374

Brovchak, L., Starovoit, L., Likhitska, L., & Shvets, I. (2024). Integrating music, drama, and visual arts in extracurricular programs: Enhancing psychological development in early school-aged children. Sapienza, 5(3), Article 791. https://doi.org/10.51798/sijis.v5i3.791

CASEL. (2020). What is SEL? Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. https://casel.org/what-is-sel/

Çenberci, S., & Tufan, E. (2023). Effect of music education based on Edwin E. Gordon's theory on children's developmental music aptitude and social-emotional learning skills. International Journal of Music Education, 41(3), 373–389. https://doi.org/10.1177/02557614231196973

Chen, H., & Yu, Y. (2022). The impact of social-emotional learning: A meta-analysis in China. Frontiers in Psychology, 13, Article 1040522. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1040522

Cook, A. L., & Murphy, K. M. (2023). Advancing transformative social-emotional learning through group work with upper elementary students. Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 48(1), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2022.2158974

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development, 82(1), 405–432. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

Ebrahem, Y. M. F., Abouzeid, S. M. A. E. N., & Mahmoud, O. A.-S. H. (2024). The effectiveness of a program based on visual arts in developing meta-emotional skills among deaf students. International Tinnitus Journal, 28(1), 235–250. https://doi.org/10.5935/0946-5448.20240035

Eckhoff, A. (2025). Methodological insights and trends: Participatory positioning of children and youth in visual art education research. International Journal of Art & Design Education. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1111/jade.12589

Elias, M. J. (2019). The future of social-emotional learning: Addressing the challenges of the present and the needs of the future. Educational Psychologist, 54(3), 167–180.

Fancourt, D., & Finn, S. (2019). What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. World Health Organization.

Goldstein, T. R., & Winner, E. (2012). Enhancing empathy and theory of mind. Journal of Cognition and Development, 13(1), 19-37. https://doi.org/10.1080/15248372.2011.573514

Kalmanowitz, D., & Potash, J. S. (2010). Ethical considerations in the global teaching and promotion of art therapy to non-art therapists. The Arts in Psychotherapy, 37(1), 20–26. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2009.09.001

Malchiodi, C. A. (2020). Trauma and expressive arts therapy: Brain, body, and imagination in the healing process.Guilford Press.

Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2017). Social and emotional learning and teachers. The Future of Children, 27(1), 137–155. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2017.0007

Wright, S., Watkins, M., Areshidze, G., & Moon, J. (2014). Creative arts-based pedagogies in early childhood education for social and emotional learning. Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education, 8(2), 67–92.

Ford, K., & Campbell, S. (2024). Being participatory through photo-based images. In Being Participatory: Researching with Children and Young People (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Garner, P. W., Legette, K., & Shadur, J. M. (2024). A mixed-methods approach to identify elements of culturally attuned teacher-student relationship interventions. Psychology in the Schools, 61(1), 57–77. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22943

Hassani, S., & Schwab, S. (2021). Social-emotional learning interventions for students with special educational needs: A systematic literature review. Frontiers in Education, 6, Article 710732. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.710732

Heidelburg, K., Sipior, C., & Fredrick, S. (2025). A systematic review of cultural adaptations to social-emotional learning interventions for PreK–12 Black students. School Psychology, Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000591

Jackson Foster, L. J., Deafenbaugh, L., & Miller, E. (2018). Group metaphor map making: Application to integrated arts-based focus groups. Qualitative Social Work, 17(2), 305–322. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918771756

Kaur, J., & Sharma, A. (2024). Measuring early childhood educators' knowledge of social-emotional learning pre- and post-training. Current Psychology, 43(12), 10942–10970. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04216-3

Koç, N. (2025). Harnessing creative drama-based storytelling for emotional skill development: Perspectives from early childhood teachers in different countries. International Journal of Educational Research, 124, 102192. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102192

Lashley, Y., & Halverson, E. R. (2020). Towards a collaborative approach to measuring social-emotional learning in the arts. Arts Education Policy Review, 121(3), 182–192. https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2020.1787909

Liu, J., Suboh, R. B., & Alizadeh, F. (2024). Exploring the role and function of music in drama teaching: Impact of music genre and engagement on emotional development. Revista Electronica de LEEME. (If volume/issue/page numbers available, please add).

Lucas, M., Mack, V., Ahmad, E., & Cipriano, C. (2025). Multilingual students and social and emotional learning interventions: A systematic review. Review of Educational Research. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543231199833

Lynn, S., Carroll, A., Nankervis, K., & Antrobus, E. (2024). A systematic review of delivery modes in school-based adolescent SEL programs. Review of Education. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3267

McCallops, K., Barnes, T. N., & Jones, I. (2019). Culturally responsive pedagogy within SEL interventions in urban schools: A systematic review. International Journal of Educational Research, 93, 170–187. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2019.02.007

McGovern, K. R., & Yeganeh, V. (2024). Devised drama as social-emotional learning. Anglica, 33(1), 19–41. https://doi.org/10.7146/ajs.v33i1.130839

Meland, E. A., & Brion-Meisels, G. (2023). Transformational lessons from youth participatory action research to nurture SEL with adolescents. Frontiers in Psychology, 14, 1059317. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1059317

Mendy, J., & Madiope, M. (2020). Curriculum transformation: A case in South Africa. Perspectives in Education, 38(2), Article 4516. https://doi.org/10.38140/psl.v38i2.4516

Mogro-Wilson, C., & Tredinnick, L. (2020). Influencing social and emotional awareness and empathy with a visual arts and music intervention for adolescents. Children and Schools, 42(3), 148–156. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdaa008

Müller, E., Naples, L. H., & Cannon, L. (2024). How an integrated arts program facilitated social and emotional learning. International Journal of Early Years Education, 32(2), 132–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2023.2279879

Ng, S. C., & Sun, H. (2022). Promoting social-emotional learning through shared book reading: Examining teachers' strategies and children's responses. Early Education and Development, 33(8), 1326–1346. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2020.1808507

Omasta, M., Graham, M., & Siebert, J. J. (2020). Social-emotional learning and the national core arts standards: A cross-disciplinary analysis of policy and practice. Arts Education Policy Review, 122(3), 158–170. https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2020.1719369

Pancorbo, G., Primi, R., & De Fruyt, F. (2021). Formative assessment of social-emotional skills using rubrics: A review of knowns and unknowns. Frontiers in Education, 6, 644519. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.644519

Pereira, N. S., & Marques-Pinto, A. (2017). Including dance instruction in an after-school SEL program improves students' self-management and relationship skills. Arts in Psychotherapy, 53, 36–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2017.01.004

Swierad, E. M., & Williams, O. (2023). Proof of concept for a novel social-emotional learning program: The B.E. M.Y. F.R.I.E.N.D. framework. Education Sciences, 13(10), 747. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13100747

Van de Sande, M. C., Pars-Van Weeterloo, E., & Fekkes, M. (2024). Parents' perspectives on adolescent social-emotional learning: An explorative qualitative study. Health Education, 124(1-2), 20–38. https://doi.org/10.1108/HE-07-2023-0074

Zimba, Z. F., Khosa, P., & Pillay, R. (2021). Using blended learning in South African social work education to facilitate student engagement. Social Work Education, 40(2), 263–278. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1729508