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School-based drama, health and wellbeing: Challenges to studying its effectiveness

Previous qualitative studies demonstrate that using drama methods in education has several benefits perceived by students, including increased empathy, social skills and self-expression. However, effectiveness studies in the area of drama education are very rare. The current paper reports on the effect of a school-based drama programme on social and emotional wellbeing for 4th and 5th graders (mean age 10.4 years). In the study, the benefits of school-based drama in primary school students were examined by using a controlled before-after design (N = 190). The response rate was 71%. Assessments were obtained at baseline and right after implementation of the programme from students and teachers. Additionally students (N=16) were interviewed through semi-structured focus group interviews after the program in the drama classes. The findings suggest that the benefits of drama methods were connected to social and emotional wellbeing, such as improved social relationships in the class, decreased bullying and increased understanding of diversity of people, and consequences of bullying. This paper furthermore discusses the dilemma of studying effectiveness of drama methods in the school setting.

The project

Our project was inspired by previous positive results of qualitative drama research and the good experiences of teachers using drama in their class rooms (e.g. O'Toole & Burton 2005, Heikkinen 2010). Additionally, a systematic

review (Joronen et al. 2008) showed that some school-based drama or theatre programmes succeeded in increasing knowledge and positive attitudes related to health behaviour among school children.

Another reason to develop a drama programme was the sad news of high level of bullying in OECD countries. Moreover, although Finnish students succeed very well in PISA studies they do not like school and their peer relations are at the lowest in OECD countries (OECD, 2009). We were assuming that drama as a collective and participatory method will improve social skills and social and emotional learning as well as social relationships between students and student and teachers. Our understanding of health is comprehensive and covers all areas of health - not only the physical aspects (see Keogh et al. 2012).

The school-based drama programme

The school-based drama programme had a strong focus on improving social competence and social and emotional wellbeing in the classroom which may also reduce bullying. We highlight that 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 (Somers 2003, Häkämies 2007). Drama also involves mutual and democratic relationships between students, the teacher or other adult in school.

The drama stories used were related to friendship, loss of a friend, bullying, support to

the bullied classmate, tolerance and child abuse (Owens & Barber, 1998; Owens et al., Airaksinen, & Korhonen, 2002). The teachers implemented the drama sessions based on two drama handbooks. Home activities included interactional tasks between parent(s) and child (e.g. the child interviewed his or her parent about the school life and bullying when the parent was a school child). Parents' evenings were based on themes which emerged from parents' and teachers' suggestions, such as bullying, family-school cooperation and parental monitoring. Parents' evenings were led by a drama teacher, Annukka Häkämies, who used drama methods to enhance interaction between parents and teachers.

The research

The quantitative part of the study was a controlled before-after intervention design and the data were collected by structured questionnaires. Students (N = 190) and their parents (N = 190) were recruited from two primary schools with similar demographics and socio-economics in the Southern Finland and purposively allocated either to an intervention group (drama) or a control group. The response rate was 71 percent.

Data were additionally gathered through open-ended responses of students (n = 80) and semi-structured focus group interviews of pupils after the program in the drama classes.

The main interview questions were: (1) What kinds of issues do you recall from the drama program? (2) Did you learn something in the drama program? (3) If yes, what kinds of things did you learn? Four focus group interviews were performed with four pupils (two girls and two boys) per group per class. (Joronen et al. 2011) The research data were analyzed statistically and by using inductive content analysis.

Assessments and qualitative results

Assessments included social competence, social relationships in the class room and bullying experiences. Multisource Assessment of Social Competence scale (MASK) (Junttila et al. 2006) is a 15-item scale and it measured social skills and antisocial behavior of pupils perceived by pupils and teachers. Two parts of School Wellbeing Profile (Konu & Lintonen, 2006) measured social relationships and bullying experiences at school.

There was a clear increase in empathy in the drama group assessed by teachers, $p < 0.05$ (Figure 1 below). The antisocial behavior stayed at the low level in the drama group whereas it increased in the control group in teachers' assessments (Kemppainen et al. 2010). However, children's self-assessments of their social competence did not change significantly during the research period either in the drama or in the control group.

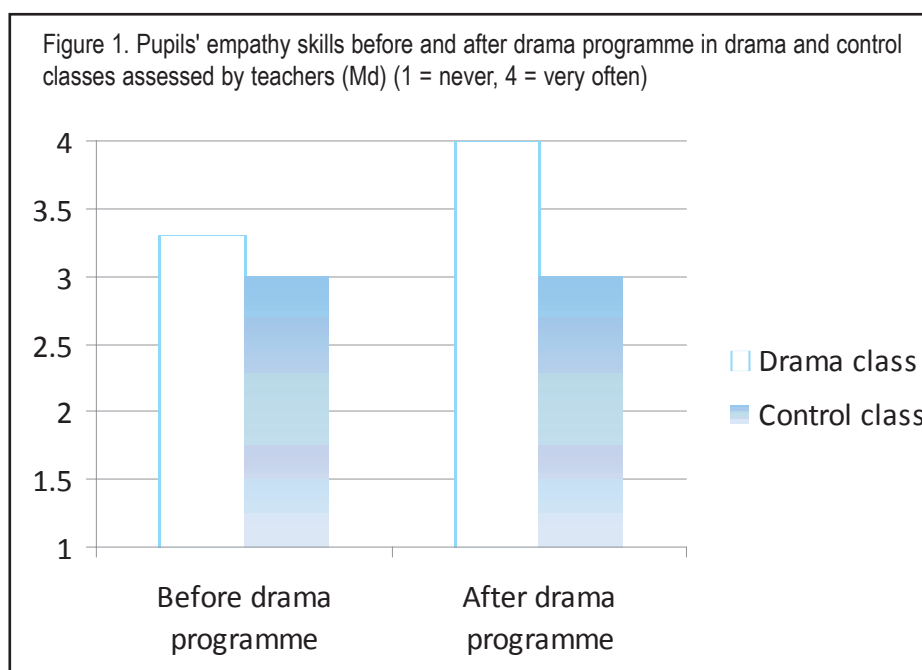
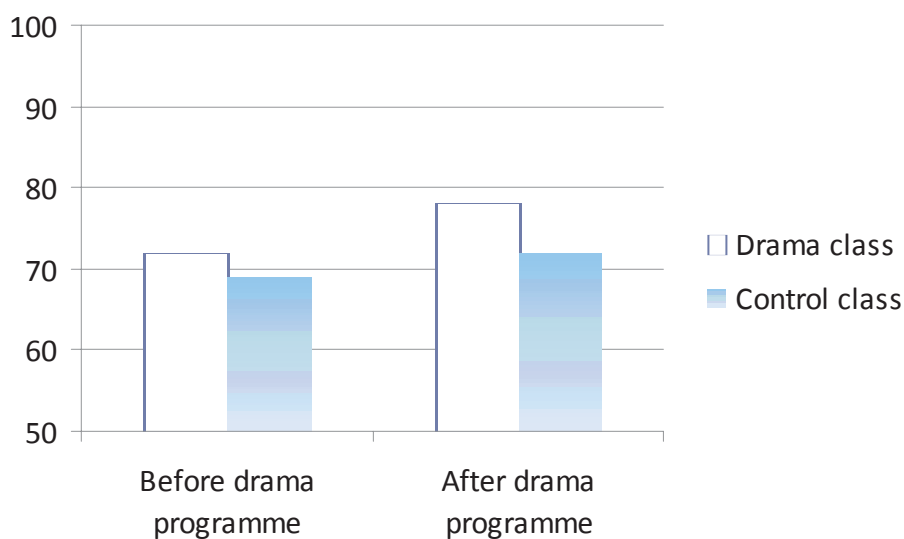


Figure 2. Student-student relationships before and after drama programme in drama and control classes (Mean) (0 = very poor, 100 = very good)



A statistically significant increase was found in student-student relationships assessed by pupils in the drama classes (Figure 2 above). Bullying victimization decreased from pretest (59%) to posttest (38%) in the intervention group ($p < 0.05$) whereas it stayed stable in the control group (38 - 39%). (Joronen et al. 2012).

The qualitative data showed that some students had negative experiences about the drama: doubt about the authenticity of the stories, the open end of the stories irritated a few of the students, some of the students found the drama sessions boring without analyzing this in more detail, and getting an insight into the role person was perceived as difficult by a couple of students. The positive drama experiences of pupils included e.g. increased listening to others and conversations between child and adults, and processing emotions (joy, sadness, irritation). Pupils expressed that they learned through drama e.g. the significance and universality of friendship, consequences of maltreatment, friendly behavior and positive interaction with adults (Joronen et al. 2011).

Conclusion

The results showed that empathy skills of the pupils were improved and anti-social behavior stayed at the low level in the drama group. Additionally the student-student relationships in the drama group improved and bullying victimization decreased significantly from pre-test to post-test in the drama group. Qualitative data showed examples of enhanced social and

emotional learning, such as processing emotions. The results suggest that drama has the potential of learning social and emotional skills at school. At the same time we should keep in mind that drama is only one pedagogical method and it may not be suitable method for every pupil in the classroom.

However, although our study controlled a number of intervening factors there is always a doubt of reporting too positive results. Students and teachers involved in any intervention may assess the impact in a socially desirable way. In future effectiveness studies should

include the assessments from teachers, other school staff's, students and parents (see e.g. White et al. 2004). Heikkinen suggests new ways of research methods when studying drama in education; he speaks e.g. about narrative research. He also argues that research should take place throughout the process, not just at the end of the drama programme. (Heikkinen 2010) The long term effects of programmes also should be studied in future studies.

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